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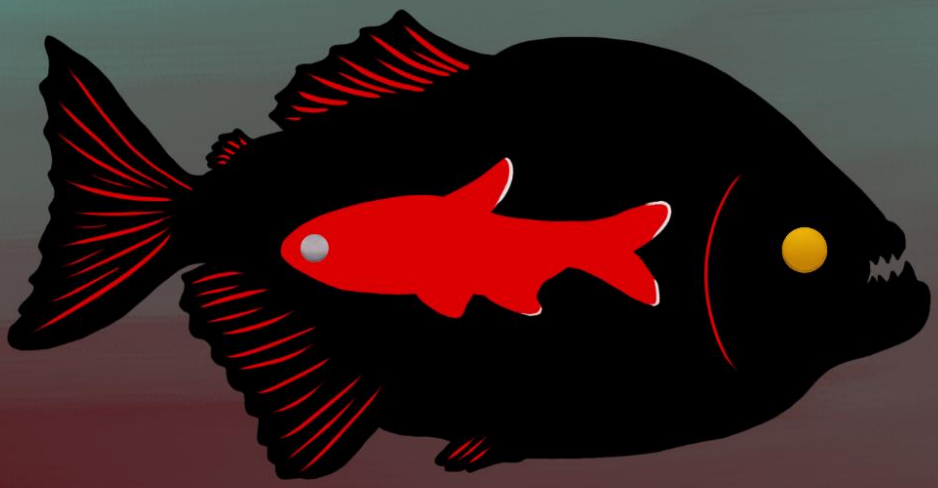

M.R. Void

TETRA: From the Many

Book one of Tetralogy

M.R. Void

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PROLOGUE

“WITH RECORD BREAKING UNEMPLOYMENT,” the screen announced, “some are wondering what can be done?”

A fake smile curls across the face of the news reporter. “Thankfully,” she continues, “the world’s first trillionaire, a local from our proud region, may hold the answers we need.”

Sitting near the back of a crowded bar, tucked away in darkness, was Theodore R. Hudson. His blue eyes, unfocused, he stared down at the glass of water on the table. He always sat near a potential exit: conditioning from countless years of experience. He demanded as many options as possible for any scenario in life, and he dressed inconspicuously to fit in anywhere.

Yet today, he’d momentarily let his guard down because his mind troubled him, searching for a solution after three days of contemplation. He knew he was close to finding an answer, yet he was running out of time. His brown mustache twitched on his lip.

Throughout the bar patrons turned their heads towards the screen in a wave. The bartender, seeing this motion, reached for the remote to raise the screen’s volume. The vibe from within the bar, flooded with the smell of seafood, was beginning to change.

Sobered by the shift, Theodore became alert. His formerly pale face, now tanned, remained motionless while his eyes swept the room. With the slightest twist of his hip, he felt his concealed pistol pressing against his back. A soothing reminder, and a subtle action that always calmed him. Satisfied the change in atmosphere was non-hostile, Theodore allowed himself to relax and listen to the news report.

The bartender raised the volume for everyone in the bar to hear.

“That’s right,” another news reporter joined in, “here at FOMO News, we were the first station to break the story last week that Tyler Santiago has announced the establishment of a

charity that intends to return some of his hard-earned investments back into our thriving community, and how you and your family may begin seeing offers for contract work in the mail."

The screen transitioned, the faces of FOMO News fading away to make space for a new scene to compose itself in front of the captive audience. Trillionaire Tyler Santiago—smiling from behind the glass—let his moment sink in to grow his crowd's anticipation. The bar, overflowing with alcohol and patrons, was otherwise silent.

Theodore took advantage of the transition to return to his idle thoughts from earlier. While he only had a few moments to spare, he could entertain other thoughts simultaneously.

No, he resumed an internal conversation from within his mind. *That wouldn't work. Perhaps if I positioned the body so that the cleaning staff found him instead of —*

"Mr. Santiago," an unfamiliar voice cut off Theodore's thoughts once again, causing him to compartmentalize his internal discussion and return his attention to the screen.

"Thank you for having us. Last week your charity announced it would help get our communities off government food vouchers and instead bring them satisfying and valuable contractual work. Are you ready to explain more about your proposal to our viewers at home?"

"That's right," Mr. Santiago nodded gently. His dark green eyes, a stark contrast to his black hair and beard, lit up as he took advantage of the question thrown at him. "The Santiago Corporation is excited to announce a new service program that will provide legal citizens with the opportunity to make a modest stipend while doing a valuable service for their community."

The trillionaire paused his speech for a moment, theatrically gesturing towards the reporter with his hands as though they were old friends. "And please," Mr. Santiago added humbly, looking hurt. "Just call me Tyler." He winked.

“Through this new service program,” Tyler Santiago continued, “citizens can stop draining *your* hard-earned tax dollars and instead start cleaning up *your* neighborhoods. We expect to contract out a quarter of a million new positions—all at fair market rates, mind you—to provide valuable labor to our bustling region. For example: we can start by removing those unsightly trash piles and homeless encampments that have plagued our streets for far too long.”

Tyler shook his head. A look of disgust, seasoned with disappointment, grew on his bearded face. “This trash harms the reputation and soaring economy of our Pacific Northwest. And Santiago’s Charity will fix that perception—and more!” Mr. Santiago smiled with comfort.

The reporter eagerly leaned forward. “Mr. Santiago—I’m sorry, Tyler—we here at FOMO News have read that these contracts provide *more* than a modest stipend. Could you please tell our viewers about their potential rewards?”

“Of course,” Tyler said. “These contractors will have the opportunity of a lifetime to make friends and gain invaluable memories. Through our corporate-provided facilities, Santiago will ensure these team’s work together, sleep together, and eat together.”

Pride grew on Mr. Santiago’s face, fetching a social lure to dangle in the story. “In fact, it was our veterans who had served overseas during the Auckland Incident who designed this service-based mentality.” Tyler now looked in visible pain after the reference, his voice trembling as he continued.

He sure knows how to entertain an audience, Theodore privately observed, his eyes scanning the crowd before him.

“As you know,” Tyler said. “I was born in Puerto Rico. While I later moved to Seattle, to the modest town of Medina, I will never forget my roots.” Tyler shook his head. “And I will always remember how the USS *Puerto Rico* held strong against New Zealand’s injustice a decade ago!”

An American flag transitioned onto the screen behind the trillionaire, waving in the wind. The text "USS *Puerto Rico* (SSBN-931)" displayed proudly in the corner to remind the audience of the Super Patriot Act class nuclear submarine. Tyler took multiple, unnecessarily long breaths to collect himself. His timing was impeccable. Bar patrons began to lose themselves in a frenzy of patriotic insanity while they waited for him to continue.

"But you and your family deserve the best," Tyler returned to his earlier point and regained his composure. "And now you, too, can make an honest living as a productive citizen within our beautiful—and perfect—Pacific Northwest. Thank you."

The interview segment ended triumphantly and the text on the screen closed out with:

Santiago's Charity Investments (2029)

FOMO NEWS: Don't Miss Out!

Cheers erupted throughout the bar while patrons raised their glasses in celebration. Drunks began to boast and challenging one another to compete for the first Santiago contract.

Theodore, however, found himself entertaining an unexpected and new thought. *An honest living?*

His mind reeled with the implications of this Santiago program. His mustache twitched again on his upper lip while his sapphire eyes darted around the crowd before him. His ears focused on the news station while waiting for the frenzy in the bar to calm down.

"—another individual with no active warrants was struck by a private security cruiser in downtown Seattle this morning. While the individual's body caused minor cosmetic damage to

the cruiser, the security guard, who was responding to retail theft, was thankfully unharmed," the news ended.

During all the commotion, the bartender had briefly lost the remote control before eventually finding it again and lowering the screen's volume back to its original level. Cheers were heard.

Theodore returned his full attention back to his earlier thoughts, the calculating man in his early forties now smiling to himself as he reached for his glass of water. He took a deep breath and slowly exhaled.

No, Theodore determined. *A dishonest living is more profitable.*

And with that, he went back to planning his next assassination: for Theodore R. Hudson was an assassin by trade, a corporate murderer, a serial killer for business.

And business was good.

CHAPTER 1 — LOURINA

SHIT. Why does Santiago's HIT Corporation keep making my life difficult? Lourina Sanches thought as she read a news post about the Hospitality and Industrial Technologies arm of the Santiago Corporation that is now cleaning up the city.

She sighed, listening to the silence that filled her office. *Poking through those trash piles was an easy way to gather evidence.* Lourina stared at her case board on the wall next to her. *And I have already lost more clients than I can afford.*

Leaning back in her chair, her brown eyes drifted lazily across the small office—searching for some form of visual distraction.

Distractions helped her concentration, or so she believed.

On the other side of the room, her office signage displayed proudly in the center of a reinforced door:

LOURINA SANCHES PI

LICENSED PRIVATE INVESTIGATOR

Lourina stared at the text and felt numb.

She had resigned from her law enforcement career after working like hell to save up enough money to create her own private firm. While renting out this tiny office had been a worthwhile career investment, it was also destroying her financially during this economic downturn.

Every year the economy seemed to get worse.

She could hear her mentor's voice in her head, reliving her time back at the academy in 2024. He had shaken his head after then Cadet Sanches told him about her plans: she wanted to rush to

become a detective so that one day she could become a private investigator and work for herself…

"Listen," he counselled her. She braced herself, expecting him to scold her for wanting to quit so early in her career—but he didn't.

Instead he offered her some sage advice.

"No one will ever respect a PI working out of their own apartment, Sanches." His eyes were gentle, as if trying to soften the blow that came next. "You will need your own private office."

Lourina hated that the man had been right.

A private office gave her more customers, but it also increased her overhead expenses. Dramatically. And with this tightening economy, fewer clients could afford even her low rates. While horrific crimes were always happening—murders, missing persons, theft and assaults—families were struggling to afford services that could provide them with closure after their police departments ignored them. One example of that was hiring private investigators.

And while the Santiago contracts that had been recently launched would introduce income into the community, Lourina also knew most of that income would be going right back into paying off their current debts. No matter how much a corporation paid anyone these days, no one could escape the financial event horizon.

Not without luck.

Scanning her overflowing desk, Lourina's gaze stopped at a pile of food vouchers that lay hap-haphazardly in the corner. At least I won't starve anytime soon, she reasoned.

She had recently started to accept alternative forms of payment for her services, such as government food vouchers from desperate families—willing to offer anything they could to find new information about their loved ones. "A trade's a trade," Lourina would tell her clients, hoping to skip past these awkward conversations. Although her acceptance of non-traditional payments soothed her client's concerns, she secretly hoped for their money.

Potential clients would sometimes ask Lourina to investigate crimes she could never bring herself to deal with. The crimes were not heinous; rather, they were emotionally draining. Infidelity, neighborhood squabbles, and other almost theatrically dramatic cases where people had more time on their hands than sense in their head, were rarely worth the trouble.

And the potential for violence, she ruminated.

Lourina found it surprising how far some people would go after being caught in a domestic situation. *Especially when you compared their actions to those who had been caught red-handed with, say, a murder weapon!*

These unexpected thoughts caused Lourina to brush her hand over her left arm subconsciously. Her fingers gliding over one of the countless scars from her days as a rookie cop. A subtle reminder of how thankful she was to finally start her own path in life—and finally away from everyone telling her what to do.

A soft beep came from behind her along with the beginning of an electric motor whirling. "Feeding time fellas," Lourina called out to her office companions. Next to her desk was an aquarium tank with four red fish floating aimlessly: Alex, Brad, Charles, and Danny.

Despite her otherwise sharp memory and observational skills, Lourina could rarely remember who was who. She often called them by their names in alphabetical order—starting by whichever fish she noticed first. (Brad was secretly her favorite.)

A memory started to play in her mind.

"Please take care of them for me."

A child's face looked up at her with tears in his eyes. He stared at her in helplessness. His family was moving away. His father: dead. Lourina was the one who'd discovered his body after days of intense searching. An unfortunate, but common, occurrence these days.

Hoping to start a new life elsewhere and to put the painful memories behind them, the family decided to leave their fish and equipment behind before moving away. Lourina accepted them, grateful for a distraction in the office—although she knew nothing about fish.

She just wanted to make the kid feel better.

Lourina shook her head to physically force the memory away, scolding herself. *Not now*, she warned.

She did not know how to deal with fish — they just eat flakes and shit, right? Well, at least the automatic equipment handled everything, except for the occasional water change that she had to perform. *And I'll be screwed if that damned monitor ever breaks,* she mused.

Dark thoughts corrected herself with morbid amusement: *Actually, they'll be screwed.* Her amber eyes focused on the four fish.

Lourina watched as one fish rushed another, nipping at them with their mouth. This display of violence caused Lourina to sigh with exaggeration. "Brad," she called out. "Behave."

Brad was the only member of the family that she could actually remember—on account of his silver fin tips… and his unusually aggressive behavior. In a way, Brad reminded Lourina of herself—minus the biting part. *Was Brad even a "he"?* Lourina had never figured that out, either. She would get to it, though. *Someday… maybe.*

Next to the fish tank stood her academy graduation photo: Officer Sanches, proudly wearing her new uniform and holding her award for achieving second place in her graduating class. Her tanned features complemented her dark hair, wrapped tightly and neatly in a bun. She wore her uniform sharply and with pride. But despite the high honor, Sanches privately resented her placement.

Second place, she let herself drift back into her memories again, getting lost in thought…

Silver medal. Silver… tips? Brad, right? "Hasemania nana," known as a 'silvertip' of the —

"They need…" the child's face suddenly returned from before, displaying intense concentration. "Equality!"

"Equality?" Lourina asked, amused by his unusual word choice.

His mother leaned over to correct him gently. "Equilibrium, Oliver."

“Yes.” The boy’s face lit up again. “They are characters and need equilibrium.” The child made strange gestures with his hands towards the plastic bag that held the fish. “It keeps them safe,” he added without clarification. He seemed proud of this knowledge, though!

Lourina glanced over to his mother for help, once again confused by Oliver’s choice of words. Oliver’s mother sighed: she was tired but also happy with her son’s distraction. He needed it.

“Characiformes,” his mother clarified and referred to the fish. “And their tank needs to maintain an ‘equilibrium’ for them to survive.” She smiled and shook her head. “Oliver was learning biology from— …” she paused, unable to mention her deceased husband’s name.

Lourina seized this opportunity to take control of the conversation.

“Oliver,” she started gently, “I’ll take good care of them.” Lourina looked at the equipment in the box: an empty aquarium, some food, books, and a bag of confused fish. She then looked back at Oliver and put on a brave face. “What are their names?” She asked with an encouraging smile to hide the doubt that grew deep within her mind.

The boy looked puzzled for a moment. “Um,” he said. “We were supposed to pick their names together when Dad got back.” His eyes dropped, now staring at his shoes. His shoulders dropped, too.

Lourina's smile froze on her face—as if someone had painted a mask over the shell of the human being that she now felt she was. It was a skill she had perfected during her brief career in law enforcement. A skill she still needed to use far too often. She waited for him to continue.

"I wanted to name one of them Brad," Oliver offered, looking embarrassed. "But…"

"Brad sounds like a wonderful name," Lourina interrupted. "Let's think of the rest of their names together, shall we?" She came up with an idea. "We can pick their names starting with A, C, and D!"

Oliver thought about this for a moment, his mouth silently performing his "ABCs" to understand. Suddenly, one fish turned and nipped at another. This excitement caused Oliver to laugh at the display. "Bad, Brad!" he scolded. His mother laughed, too.

"Here," she informed Lourina, "I left some reference books inside the box: aquarium maintenance, biology, feeding tips, and so on." Her right hand massaged the back of her neck. "I don't understand all of it, but it gave me a place to start." She shrugged. "It might help you, too."

"Thank you," Lourina replied. "I'll try to look at them sometime—"

A knock at the door caused Lourina's mind to come crashing back to reality. She scanned her office for any materials lying about that needed to be covered up—sensitive or personal information. "It's unlocked," she called out to her intruder.

Correction, she counseled herself. *Potential customer.*

Lourina risked glancing out the window towards the street just in case there were any additional "customers" who might be sneaking around outside. Being paranoid in this industry was a requirement to reach retirement age. Who knows who might still hold a grudge?

A man in a black suit, with no personality or flair—other than the single lapel pin on his collar to represent his corporation—stepped into the office. The man entered slowly, looking around the office and scanning for any eavesdroppers.

Either he was inexperienced with the art of "subtlety" or he simply did not care. His demeanor both amused and insulted Lourina. Once he appeared satisfied they were alone, the man turned his full attention to the investigator.

"PI Sanches?" he inquired. Everything about this man screamed "corporate." His cookie-cutter haircut, his fake smile, and the fact he wore a suit for work while living in the Pacific Northwest. He wasn't a lawyer, a movie star, or anything else: just a corporate man. *And only one corporation forces their employees to wear suits here anymore…*

"What may I do for you?" she replied as her eyes glanced at his lapel to verify. *Mr. Santiago's HIT corporation? Oh, shit.* Lourina's mouth watered at the potential opportunity in front of her. *Or danger,* she privately cautioned herself. She sat up straight in her chair.

She rapidly flashed through her memories and searched for any recent cases that might have crossed paths with the corporation. While she had always been careful to avoid corporate cases,

you were never sure as to how deep connections ran in this day and age. Especially when it came to the most powerful man in the world: Tyler Santiago. *The man who survives.*

"I believe," the man said, pulling out a folder from under his arm, "that you might be just the investigator we are looking for." He walked towards her and offered the folder. It was pitch black, fashioned from high-quality fabric, accessorized by a gold and white "S" on the cover. The design matched his lapel pin and even his cufflinks.

Standing, Lourina accepted the folder and opened it. It took her a single glance to know what they were about to discuss.

While she had never worked for Mr. Santiago before, she knew a missing person's case file anywhere. It was routine for law enforcement to create their files with a photo of the missing person, along with body descriptions and the last known locations on the front page. It often reminded Lourina of those "Have you seen me?" posters you might ignore on street walls.

And from this photo, Lourina could practically smell the "old money" lifting off the page.

Interesting, she mused. *Very interesting.*

She had never worked a high-profile case like this before, but why question fate? This case could make or break her new career.

"I will schedule a meeting with you and Mr. Kim," the man continued, referencing Santiago's infamous second-in-command, "as he would like to discuss this matter personally at his estate." His eyes studied Lourina as she glanced through the folder. Today she wore her favorite light purple hoodie and a pair of denim cargo pants: an outfit chosen with functionality in mind and her habitual necessity for pockets. The man, however, seemed equally as unimpressed with her selected attire as she was with his.

Despite his obvious evaluation of her worth Lourina couldn't contain her building excitement. For the first time since resigning from law enforcement, she could feel the weight of her financial woes beginning to lift off her shoulders. *Never mind food vouchers,* she mused to herself. *Santiago might actually make my life easier. Can I really be about to work for a trillionaire?*

She had no idea though, just how badly she had miscalculated.

CHAPTER 2 — THEODORE

"SORRY TEDDY," the man across the table shrugged, his face neutral. "Our rate has changed."

The unexpected and dismissive answer ignited a firestorm within Theodore's chest. Fortunately, however, Theodore was able to contain his rage before giving his reply, his voice almost as cool as the morning breeze.

"Please, do not call me Teddy," Theodore corrected gently. His voice started off professionally before turning dark and firm. "Also, we had an agreement," he growled.

Both men sat atop a balcony overlooking the Puget Sound. The nightlife of Seattle—once bustling decades ago—was dead quiet. Occasionally, you might see a late-night worker leaving their office, or perhaps some wandering homeless people, but otherwise the city was as silent as the body of water it overlooked.

To the south of Seattle stood a colossal black tower where Tyler Santiago reigned to watch over "his" city (one of many he claims), his newest tower the latest flaunting of his ever-growing wealth.

To stay open in this new economy, Seattle restaurants had started to cater their experiences towards serving corporations rather than individuals. Private balconies in Seattle quickly became the preferred meeting space for sensitive business transactions over the years. Outside of corporate espionage (traditionally facilitated by hidden audio recorders) most of these conversations died in the wind, unable to reach the streets below. They were—usually—safe.

Beside these two men sat a group of undercover corporate bodyguards in casual clothes, eating a meal and pretending not to listen in on their conversation. *And prepared to react,* Theodore presumed*, depending on how I handle this news.*

He did not like how this situation was going. Despite sitting in a comfortable chair, Theodore was agitated. His gun was missing from its holster; currently locked away in a safe near the entrance after being surrendered upon entry. He was also not facing the door. No matter how respected you were by the company, you would always be treated like a guest in their house. And the house always wins.

The man sitting across from Theodore, who was thinner and older than the assassin with graying hair, expected an objection. He nodded in agreement—with sympathy—before trying to soften the blow. “These things happen—” he began.

“Not acceptable,” Theodore countered sharply, cutting him off.

Theodore felt the surrounding temperature drop. He heard silverware falling on plates: an audible, and intentional, warning by the group of bodyguards for him to tread lightly.

But to Theodore, getting burned like this obligated him to display his dissatisfaction. His reputation required him to always show strength. Despite his harsh words and disturbing thoughts, Theodore did not physically move a muscle. His ocean blue eyes remained steadfastly locked on the man across from him, studying him with intensity.

Theodore knew that this man, and his actions, would determine what happened next; therefore, Theodore needed to study him to get as much information as possible before reacting. While Theodore had surrendered his gun before entering Renee’s Regale, he never entered a property without at least one hidden tool that could slip past security, such as he had under his golden windbreaker jacket.

The man across the table, a middleman—for that’s what they always were, as his clients never presented themselves out of paranoia—shifted his eyes from Theodore’s to someone else. The

man waited some time before sighing to himself and using a hand motion for “go away” to the bodyguards.

Or at least, Theodore thought to himself, *what that motion* usually *meant.* The assassin expected a competent group to use their “kill sign” in reverse, thus keeping their victims off guard. *Let me* think *I’m safe, is that it?*

Theodore heard movement behind him. In response, he subtly removed his hands from the table and brought them to his wrist, imitating a nervous tick and fidgeting with his dress shirt cufflinks.

To the untrained eye: this was a harmless action. But Theodore, had just unbuttoned the concealed pouch in his sleeve that was full of powder. The chemical, which was dyed white to resemble cocaine, was a potent irritant. It was also the same color as his shirt to blend in maintaining its secrecy.

And non-lethal, Theodore reminded himself, *just in case someone tried to test it. Besides, only an idiot would use deadly chemicals within their own breathing distance.*

Taking a few moments to examine the surrounding environment, Theodore tried to estimate the strength and direction of the nightly breeze. He observed how the winds moved the surrounding scenery, such as the white tablecloths.

It wasn’t strong enough. The assassin scowled. *Wind’s not in my favor tonight*, he deducted.

However, Theodore had other options. His mind raced through the potential outcomes and the steps he would need to take, commanding his body to get ready to hold his breath and close his eyes. His dress shoes braced the floor, ready to propel himself forward in a single leap. *Think, take control:*

1. Blind.

2. Grab.

3. Shield.

Using his peripheral vision, he analyzed everything within reach. The table looked to be made of solid metal, potentially strong enough to withstand low caliber impacts. Also, it did not appear to be bolted to the floor: most likely by design—an impromptu defense mechanism by the company. *But if they were smart,* Theodore forced himself to consider the worst-case scenario, *they would have prepared this trap by using weapons that could pierce their own cover. Home field advantage.*

The movement behind him continued for another few heartbeats. Theodore quietly took a deep breath, his mind preparing for what would happen next.

4. Search.

If the assassin was lucky, this middleman would be too egotistical to follow basic security procedures. Hopefully, the man would have a weapon on him despite already being surrounded by guards. Theodore would need to seize that weapon before he could consider new options for attack. But in case all else failed, the killer's eyes wandered towards the balcony railing. A disturbing and final thought entered his mind:

5. Jump.

Theodore smirked. *At least I wouldn't go alone,* he amused himself. *Perhaps if I was quick, he sized up the man across from him, I might be able to position him as a cushion…*

Theodore knew that at twenty-one floors high in the sky, these thoughts were both hopeless and in vain. But it brought him some strange comfort. He also wanted to provide everyone with one hell of a goodbye surprise with his resignation. *Always have options.*

Another heartbeat later, Theodore heard the steps of the guards trailing off before the sound of a metal door closing behind them. Silence—no one was moving. They were alone.

The middleman, unaware of how close he had come to becoming an impromptu human pillow, unceremoniously reached for his wine. Theodore, however, remained still and fiddled with his cufflink, ready to either use or re-secure the powder with a simple twist of his wrist. He resisted the temptation to play with his clip-on safety tie.

"Mr. Hudson," the man across the table broke the silence before taking a sip of his glass as his eyes lazily wandered over to the Sound. "Our employer, Mr. Gordon, has undergone some…" His face began to contort; his mind clearly unable to search for the right word at the moment. "Changes," he finished.

Theodore wanted to confirm that the guards had left, that everything was as he assumed. Risking a glance behind him to verify his assessment, Theodore found himself relaxing at the sudden peace before him. He exhaled and allowed his hands to return to the table. Reaching for his glass of water, Theodore inquired innocently.

"Changes?" *What are you trying to tell me?*

"Behavioral," the man responded morbidly.

The two men locked eyes for a moment, Theodore realizing the gravity of the words spoken by the man. It was one thing to admit that your boss—a boss who commissioned assassins—was losing their mind. But it was another to admit it while on company grounds.

Theodore felt he was being given an unexpected, but deserved, sign of respect. In an industry otherwise known for being "just business," this twisting conversation started to feel monumental to the assassin. His mind felt unusually open. *Is there more to this?*

Theodore visibly sighed, unable to help himself, before responding. “Okay,” he leveled. “What’s the new rate?” *At least I am not being stiffed completely. Let’s get this over with.*

“Half.”

Theodore suppressed the urge to display any emotion on his face. He felt his mouth twitching, his mustache hiding his facial movements. He didn’t want to risk showing a cringe, a flash of anger, or any other display of dissatisfaction. His emotions were to be locked up until this situation was resolved. *Control. Breathe.*

The man across the table continued. “Mr. Gordon also wanted me to offer you another contract, but…” his eyes glanced away for a moment. When they returned, he was smiling sheepishly. “I recommended to him that another contract would be unwise.”

Because you just stiffed me by half. Theodore continued to hold his tongue. Taking a moment to think over his response, the assassin verbalized a single yet ambiguous word…

“Wise.”

Still overlooking the balcony, both men allowed themselves to drink in silence. They reflected on what each other had said, hadn’t said, and could have said. Theodore considered his future income.

Before long, Theodore gave in and verbally accepted the change to his contract. He accepted the new rate, hoping to end the transaction. And once accepted, everyone could go home tonight. It was just another day at the office, in a sad way.

Well, mused Theodore, *except for the cleaning crew back at Ethan’s. Poor bastards are probably being interrogated by the police right now.* But that was just business. Besides, they will be released. No harm, no foul. *Try to keep it clean and no one should care about any low-level executives.*

Retrieving his compact 9mm pistol from the front entrance, Theodore departed Renee's Regale and headed for the tower's elevator. Strangely, his descent was oddly symbolic of his current emotional state. The corporate assassin now realized he had never learned the name of the man who had just shown him this unexpected kindness… because Theodore had never asked after all this time. It was another contact, another job. The assassin felt a tinge of embarrassment entering his otherwise conflicted heart.

But the night was still young and his blood continued to race after so much excitement. Theodore needed to get away, needed to think. He didn't want to stay in Seattle, nor did he want to drive home across the Snoqualmie Pass. No, getting burned by Mr. Gordon was not on his agenda for today.

And if Mr. Gordon was openly burning people, Theodore extrapolated, *Seattle might no longer be safe for my kind.* Could this be systemic? Or simply the behavior of one man going insane?

But why? What has changed? What about Santiago? Him too?

Everything before today had been perfect. Years of devoted service to his employers had returned gracious rewards. But not anymore it seemed. Not in this changing economy.

So much for a dishonest living, the assassin contemplated somberly.

…

The wind created a pleasant breeze as it rushed through the open windows. While it was a late fall evening in the Pacific Northwest, climate change had warmed up the region to where

Theodore could occasionally enjoy a windowless drive at night—provided he kept his golden jacket on. Fresh air helped him think.

After Renee's Regale, Theodore decided to drive down Interstate 5. He wanted to escape Seattle; however, after a few hours lost in his thoughts, he became fidgety and wanted to pull over. Realizing he was approaching the border between Washington and Oregon, the assassin decided to spend the night at a local hotel in Portland, Oregon. His emergency stash in the car would suffice.

He had also decided to expend one of his forged "enhanced" identification cards. Now assuming the identity of Chad Woodard, Theodore mentally chanted to himself the law of forgery: *as long as the money clears, no one should dig any deeper.*

The man avoided burning an ID like this whenever possible. He preferred to keep his life simple—hell, he used his real name for most of his transactions. In a world where corporations ruled from behind the shadows, having a personal "brand" was more valuable than staying hidden—even for a corporate assassin. In effect, it was his Limited Liability Company of one.

Besides, Theodore could always assume a new identity in seconds. He could even forget that Theodore R. Hudson had ever existed. *Who cares what other people call me,* he would often think, *as long as I am still being called?*

After allowing the valet to take his car—and allowing them to spread their fingerprints throughout said car for increased deniability—Theodore walked through the automatic doors before being greeted by a grand hall of exquisite design.

Theodore—now going by Chad Woodard—headed towards the front desk to confirm the reservation he had made on his emergency burner device while refueling earlier. After the usual pleasantries with the receptionist it was time to receive his room key.

“Digital key, sir?” the receptionist asked while placing the new ID in the government’s machine. It had never been tested before.

“No,” Mr. Woodard replied, his eyes staring at the scanner. “Physical, please.”

“Yes, Mr. Woodard.”

Getting a new identity hadn’t been difficult for Theodore. With his corporate connections, it was just tedious. These days everything was tied together: phones, accounts, you name it. It was so much work! A new government ID was actually the easiest part of getting a new identity—hell, they were legitimate, too! All thanks to the *other* Washington on the East Coast.

What Theodore disliked the most was how much time he needed to spend setting up the travel profiles and memorizing details for dear Mr. Woodard. Meanwhile, the biggest legal headache had been getting a new Corporate Carry license, as finding a corporation to sign off on a new license had become increasingly painful lately.

And now, after losing Mr. Gordon, Theodore realized that his options for regional replacements were dwindling. Most of his former employers had been, shall we say, “reconsolidated” over the years during business mergers and acquisitions. None of his doing, but that was the risk when going up the corporate ladder. Theodore also avoided working for Santiago because it was too public.

There was something off about Santiago. Theodore knew he was biased, but he also knew to trust his gut with this industry. But he could never prove it. Instead, he remained in the shadows with the lesser-known millionaires and billionaires. It was a comfortable level. Besides, society didn’t seem to care.

After the Supreme Court legalized the new concept of "Corporate Carry" nearly a decade ago—with the ruling that corporations, being equal to citizens, had a Second Amendment right to arm themselves—gun rights exploded within the nation.

This new right suddenly included the *employees* of corporations as being under its legal protection: even if the employees themselves did not have the legal right to carry a firearm. Outside the occasional Gun-Free Zones—such as corporate headquarters, national security installations, and billionaire compounds like Mercer Island—Corporate Carry was legalized across the entire United States. Now it was a legal mandate that schools, courtrooms, and all other public areas respected this "inalienable corporate right." And for a corporate assassin like Theodore, this inalienable right meant his options were always open.

Well, they *were* before tonight. Now things got weird and his skills at evasion came in handy. He needed to hide tonight.

Theodore trained himself to never carry his personal phone while on the job; instead, his phone was back in his apartment in Richland, Washington. The phone, taped to a robot vacuum cleaner with a portable battery pack, showed the assassin's GPS coordinates staying within the location of his apartment, occasionally moving around aimlessly during pre-programmed daylight hours.

Richland had become the perfect cover for Theodore. A massive federal installation stood just minutes away and allowed him to hide in plain sight. With a city full of federal employees, his neighbors preferred discretion and to be left alone in their solitude. In return, they provided the same courtesy to him. As far as his neighbors were concerned, Theodore was a contractor—a quiet loner who traveled for work. *Perfect.*

To avoid legal scrutiny, he kept his taxes in order. Dutifully filling out his illegal income on Schedule 1, line 8z every year on his filing, the assassin avoided detection by the dreaded Internal Revenue Service. *Take on the IRS? No, thank you! I'm not crazy.*

Sometimes, Theodore wondered if he needed to bother anymore, as the latest congressional budget proposed by corporate lobbyists—aka the members and representatives—had effectively gutted the agency. But to further increase his cover from any nosey federal agents, Theodore subscribed his personal credit cards, on a rotating basis, to multiple adult-themed websites. These subscriptions also provided the man with plausible deniability by, somewhat, tying his financial timestamps and his physical address to his bank statements.

Besides, he reminded himself, *being too morally clean would be a red flag. Just the right amount of dirt and you blend into the crowd.* He had also left his property disorganized and slightly dirty—to appear used inside—in the event a neighbor, or government agent, ever gained access to his apartment while he was away. They could never prove when he was truly there without further evidence, and he doubted anyone cared enough to acquire it. *Why would they?*

To any routine security investigation, Theodore was a perverted corporate hermit who rarely left the comfort of his own home: harmless, in their assessments. To any basic financial investigation, he was a dutiful taxpayer who appeared to live within his means.

He knew the rules of the game.

And nothing would change as long as he avoided going anywhere near the Richland nuclear reactor, of course. Nuclear reactors were the only thing corporations were afraid of anymore. A corporate meltdown risked upsetting neighboring business owners far more than they could financially anticipate for the fiscal quarter.

Paying out the environmental fines, replacing human resources, and all other trivial matters quickly added up following a nuclear catastrophe. Therefore, to minimize the financial risk, the government was graciously allowed to continue operating all nuclear reactors at a loss to the taxpayer. Corporations, instead, became the middlemen in the energy sector and resold the government's energy back to the public at a "modest" profit. Everyone—at least of importance in this calculation—won.

"Your card, sir." The receptionist smiled while giving "Woodard" back his ID along with a set of physical keys. Theodore's forged corporate ID had apparently passed the government's scanner and allowed the hotel to proceed with the transaction. "Elevators are to your left," the receptionist added graciously.

"Thank you," Mr. Woodard smiled. *Be polite but forgettable.*

Theodore walked alone to the elevator with his key in hand, a gun under his jacket, and an ill-fated driver's license resting in his pocket—now destined to meet a fire pit back at home.

But as the grand decor of the hotel surrounded Chad Woodard, and the elevator lifted him physically into the air, the only thing he felt inside was hollow.

Sleep might do me well, he surmised. But until he was in his room, the assassin kept his head facing forward and let his eyes scan for cameras and exits. *I wonder if the kitchen is still open for some late-night room service?*

His stomach softly grumbled in quiet agreement.

…

The next morning, “Chad Woodard” pretended to be a humble tourist of Portland by dressing for both the culture and the weather of the city. He knew how to sneak around here.

He wore a dark gray hoodie with jeans along with brown shoes. He visited famous locations and enjoyed a wonderful breakfast at a local Italian restaurant on 2nd Avenue and SE Morrison. He then walked off the new calories by roaming around the city before finally shopping at Portland’s famous independent “city of books.”

Taking his time to prowl through the multi-story experience, Theodore purchased countless memorabilia of the Pacific Northwest, of note, a few recent maps of the region. Once he was satisfied with his purchase he leisurely walked back to his hotel and mentally prepared himself to begin studying the material.

He needed the maps to verify the information in his head.

No matter how many times Theodore had taken a route, he always prepared alternatives in case of unexpected road closures or the need for some form of emergency escape. The maps laid out before him now provided options beyond just driving. Hiking trails, campgrounds, and small cities were some of the options that he could visit—or hide in—along the way. *Good to know.*

Now Theodore needed time to think and process all of this information. He took a long shower to cleanse his body, enjoying the hot water that steamed up the room. The assassin savored luxury resources that few hotels could afford anymore, such as unlimited hot water, which was a scarce commodity in the current economic climate. Upon finishing the shower and dressing himself in a robe, he retrieved a pack of cleaning supplies from his bag. He then started methodically retracing his steps, beginning from when he first entered the room last night. Wiping down any surface areas he could see, Theodore searched for any traces of himself that he could find.

He occasionally pondered whether something might get left behind, but he accepted that life came with the occasional risk. *Still, why make it easy for followers?* He smiled devilishly, enjoying his thoughts. *Make them work for it.*

Once the room had been wiped clean to his satisfaction, Theodore dressed himself like a traveling salesperson and prepared to leave the room, a goldish-brown handkerchief stuffed in hand. He had previously soaked the cloth in a cleaning solution before leaving, using the handkerchief to close the door behind him.

Theodore then slid the handkerchief under his jacket's cuffs while he walked down the hallway to keep the handkerchief hidden from cameras. Upon approaching the elevator, he slyly retrieved it yet again to press the gray metal buttons.

In the event a camera actually noticed his actions, Theodore hoped that security would assume their guest was merely a "neat freak." To avoid attention, he kept his head level and avoided looking up to appear suspicious—and to deny them an opportunity to get a clear look at him in return.

Unfortunately for the hotel, they would not be receiving their key cards back, nor would they receive any sort of proper checkout from dear old Mr. Woodard. Instead, the credit card on file would cover any fees the night auditors might charge him for his transgression.

As long as the money clears.

Theodore smiled to himself as he waited to retrieve his current car from the valet. The assassin mentally noted that he needed to search for a buyer to take this car off his hands—as it was currently registered to Mr. Woodard—before later burning the driver's license. His real car was hidden near his home in Richland, stored away for easy access in an emergency.

Theodore had planned for the drive back to Richland to take only a few hours. This time he had memorized the route to go across I-84 and straddle Columbia River that separated the states of Washington and Oregon. Theodore expected the drive to be light in traffic, quiet, and nonstop. He had filled his car's fuel tank the previous night before he had entered Portland—just in case he needed a late-night escape. The route would also provide him with an opportunity to cross between state lines in the event of an emergency, although he knew that taking such an action would be quite unpleasant and invite more pursuers.

But for Theodore, still burning off some steam from the night before, a quiet drive would allow the man to resume the thoughts he had been pondering since leaving Renee's Regale. He wanted more time to think about how this all came about, how his world had been shaken, and where he should go from here.

Perhaps this drive might have a purpose after all?

Still, Theodore wasn't sure.

CHAPTER 3 — KIM

PRIVATE INVESTIGATOR LOURINA SANCHES gave a fake smile to the Santiago man upon entering his office. She had been sitting in his reception, waiting a few minutes for his arrival.

She recognized the corporate game that was at play.

“Mr. Kim,” she started the conversation first, hoping to get the pleasantries out of the way.

“Ah, Detective Sanches,” said Alan Kim, Chief Operating Officer of Santiago’s HIT. The man neither walked to his desk nor towards the sitting investigator. Instead, he leisurely walked to a nearby wooden cabinet before retrieving a sealed bottle of liquor. His jet-black hair complimented the suit he wore of the same color, along with his brilliant-white undershirt that was worn without a tie.

After checking the details on the label with curiosity, Mr. Kim opened the bottle and began to pour himself a hefty glass. Mid-pour, he turned his head towards Lourina, the expression on his face asking her *would you like some?*

Lourina nodded to the man, accepting his non-verbal offer for a glass. While his bribery was in lieu of a proper handshake, to PI Sanches—not legally a “detective” anymore as that title was reserved for law enforcement—this alternative was the proper way to start a corporate case. She felt slightly disarmed by the strange flattery this executive was showing her.

How interesting, Lourina thought.

Alan Kim strolled towards Lourina, his hands full with two glasses that were generously filled. He gave Lourina the glass in his left hand, but Mr. Kim did not wait for, nor offer, a customary toast to the investigator. Instead, Mr. Kim walked back towards the counter with his own glass in his right hand. He studied the glass intensely before downing it in a single shot. Swallowing the contents, Mr. Kim took a moment to himself to reflect.

Lourina studied the man, noticing that Mr. Kim preferred to face his bottle of liquor rather than look at her. This observation made Lourina's brain work in overdrive: *ashamed to show your face? Distressed and unaware? Insulting me? Or are you simply that comfortable with the situation, Mr. Kim?*

Everyone has their own way of handling tense situations—and rich people were especially known for their dramatics. To stay on top of the situation, Lourina forced her mind to document everything the man did to establish a baseline for his personality, habits, ticks, and so on. While this was mentally draining, she was now locked in her professional mode: fishing.

Lourina had previously trained herself to minimize—but failing to stop entirely—from judging people during their first encounter. Unless, of course, the introductions were leading towards any flavor of violence. Instead, Lourina preferred to act as a neutral conversationalist to gather critical information, her questions were designed to piece together the facts already swirling in her head. Because people often acted strangely when dealing with investigators, both public and private, Lourina had developed the ability to brush off most insults when following a trail. Well, visibly ignore their insults at least.

Let's see when you begin to deviate from your norm, Mr. Kim.

Lourina swirled the amber liquor while in contemplation. Taking a moment to savor the aroma, the investigator took a curious sip of the alcohol. *Whiskey*, she surmised. She noticed a burning sensation going down her throat; her heartrate increasing, her body slowly flooding with its warmth. In just a few seconds, Lourina began to feel slightly better about the whole situation. *At least you have good taste, Mr. Kim,* she conceded.

Sanches found herself hoping to read the label from the bottle later, wanting to know who made the drink. While she knew she could never afford the bottle—whatever it was—she could at least

brag to some of her friends about it later at the bar. Tell them all about how she got a free shot of some absurdly overpriced alcohol at the executive's expense.

Wait, no — Lourina caught herself in the middle of her tangent. *If I brag to them about the price… they might try turning the conversation back around on me.*

Memories of past drunken bar experiences pulsed through her mind, reflections of similar moments. She internally groaned with dismay. *They would probably say some dumb shit, too. Like "well now, hotshot, then you can afford a round for the table since you have such rich contacts, huh?"*

Lourina suppressed an urge to smile while entertaining these thoughts. Ruminating through your mind so quickly risked bringing up more than simple memories, unfortunately. It took experience to handle the emotional baggage that came along for the ride.

"My son," Mr. Kim finally began, "has a habit of running away." The man now looked up at the mirror in front of him, using his visual reflection to continue the conversation with the investigator. His body remained still, but his brown eyes were oddly piercing. Analyzing. Searching.

Fake smiles but real liquor. Just business, Lourina gauged. *This explains the lack of concern,* she debated, *but not as to why you would suddenly hire a new investigator. Especially with your resources, Mr. Kim.* She decided to keep these observations to herself, though.

"This has happened before?" Lourina inquired, innocently attempting to widen the conversational door.

"David is an impressionable young man."

"How many times?" Lourina pressed the issue, her metaphorical foot now in the verbal door.

Alan Kim paused for a moment, seeming to deliberate over his choice of words. "Well," he

smiled sincerely, maybe the first genuine smile to grace this room today. “Quite a few times.”

You are hiding something, Mr. Kim. But what, and why? Lourina could not expose these thoughts. She knew a game was being played and she pretended to be ignorant to see what might happen next. Only once Lourina knew enough details would she then estimate where the conversation was heading before preparing her response accordingly.

Kim moved to his cellarette and refilled his now sad, empty vessel with another smooth slosh of the whiskey. His second pour was slower than the first, more controlled, and the resulting measure nearer the rim.

“Family matters can be unfortunate alliance complications for executives these days,” he continued. “And Tyler,” added Mr. Kim, “does not have a forgiving nature.” Mr. Kim stared at his refilled glass. Lourina, meanwhile, felt shocked upon hearing the trillionaire’s name being so casually referenced. *He calls Mr. Santiago by “Tyler” in public?*

Mr. Kim turned to face Lourina, his new drink tight within his grasp. “Having too many family complications will eventually cause a corporation to have…” he paused for a moment, unnecessarily dramatic. “A loss of confidence, shall we say?”

Lourina followed his lead. “You want to keep this off the company record,” she offered. This might explain some things, but not enough for her curiosity. *Your explanation makes little sense as to why you are hiring me, Mr. Kim.* She needed to keep fishing.

The executive raised his glass slightly in mock appreciation. “Well done, detective.” His words and his face were neutral, but his bronze eyes analyzed hers. He was thinking carefully about the conversation just as much as she was. Maybe even more so.

“I will pay you handsomely if you can find David and in the process, maintain discretion.” The fake smile from earlier returned to his lips. “Sounds fair, doesn’t it?”

Lourina dangled a new lure into the conversation, hoping to thread the line between these two subjects. “Do you have any old case files I could reference?” She wanted the man to bite. Old files would give her an anchor point to begin looking for David while also giving her more information as to why Kim wanted her in particular. “It would help me identify patterns from David’s previous disappearances, and bring him home faster,” she offered.

A response escaped the executive’s mouth, far too smoothly and prepared to be natural. “Confidential information, unfortunately.” He swirled his drink around while his head lowered slightly, yet his eyes remained disturbingly fixed on Lourina, causing the hair on her neck to stand up.

He was enthralled by something, but what?

“Mr. Kim, this is about the safety of your son.” She added more emphasis on this fact than she thought was necessary to gauge his response. Clearly there was more to this family matter than the usual drama. *And I am about to get placed right in the middle of it.*

“And if I accessed those files,” he countered, “it would alert corporate security.”

Bullshit, stewed Lourina. She couldn’t call the man out on the lie, nor figure out why he was acting so strange. *I am missing something important,* she realized. *Something big. But then again, this reward is too good to pass up…*

Alan Kim abruptly downed the second glass in a single gulp, capturing the substance just as he did with his first batch of the poison. The executive barely reacted to his burning throat, causing Lourina to wonder whether the man was an alcoholic—or purposefully drowning his nerves. Or perhaps both?

If Lourina were lucky then more shots of liquor might loosen his tongue, however, she doubted any luck remained in her day.

“Besides,” Mr. Kim continued, “I know all the details of David’s previous disappearances. I can give you all the information right now.” The executive added a subtle jab at Lourina to throw her off guard. “If you would like, I could provide you with a pen and paper to take notes.” His actions were clearly trying to redirect her focus, either provoking her into an emotional response or to put her on the defensive. Or, maybe, simply testing her? But she saw through it.

“That won’t be necessary, sir.” Lourina ignored the insult. “I came prepared.”

The two individuals discussed the details of David’s history. Lourina sensed the man had studied this information and rehearsed how he wanted to present it—his memory too coherent and in chronological order. Typically people would drift between memories and timelines when recalling traumatic details. Either Kim was so bored by his son’s disappearance that he could prepare all the information necessary… or there was something else at play.

Once Mr. Kim finished his stories, Sanches deducted she had all the information needed to begin her search for David. But it still did not explain why Kim had selected her. By this point, Lourina had finished her original drink and thanked the man for his time. *And for wasting mine with these games,* she internally vented. But the man was right about one thing. The pay would be excellent.

Find the trust-fund baby, get paid, and move on.

While Lourina felt conflicted about the job, the weight of her empty pockets weighed more heavily on her mind. Upon confirmation of the contract’s acceptance, Lourina departed Mr. Kim’s complex in Mercer Island while mentality formulating her next move.

…

As Lourina walked out of the complex and towards her car, Alan Kim stared at the investigator from his window.

A Santiago employee walked into the room behind him, observing her bosses' behavior before inquiring. "Do you think she knows?" the employee, a woman in a black suit, asked.

Kim continued to observe the private investigator, who was now pausing to open her old and graying car door. "No," he admitted. "But she suspects something."

Kim swirled his third drink around absentmindedly. *It won't change a thing though,* he amused himself, deciding to keep this observation private.

"We could cancel the contract and have her stand down?" the employee offered another solution.

Kim was about to respond before a new thought sprang to mind, the executive entertaining this mental tangent for a brief moment. *How interesting,* he realized. Satisfied with his calculations, Mr. Kim turned to face his employee. He enjoyed this new idea.

"Let's see what happens for now," Alan Kim ordered. "Maybe it's better this way." He smiled at her.

…

Lourina fumed the entire drive back to her private office in Tacoma. Whenever she was alone in her car, she would often enjoy verbalizing her inner thoughts out loud as it provided her with a place to vent in private, so to speak. Well, it worked for now.

"What sort of sick joke are these Santiago assholes up to, anyway?" she barked. "I fucking hate politics."

She kept talking to herself, letting her pent-up frustrations ventilate. But after some more choice words, Lourina knew that continuing to embrace her anger risked turning it into a destructive habit rather than a constructive solution.

The investigator forced herself to reorient her thoughts: the contract payout was fat. *Huge and juicy.* If Lourina wasn't facing bankruptcy, she would have declined the executive's offer. However, his offer would pay for an entire year's worth of expenses. She could finally triage her dwindling resources and build a financial nest egg to ride out the collapsing economy. *Or at least try to.*

And, she reminded herself, *I would be networking into the most powerful corporation in the world.* She smiled at that last thought.

Lourina allowed her mind to drift freely for the remainder of her drive. She was mentally exhausted after her meeting with Alan Kim and needed time to relax and blow off steam. Venting in private was one of the ways Lourina remained calm while under pressure in the field. A capacitor of emotion, in a way. A valve. An emotional release.

Lourina had risen quickly through the ranks in her department. She had made detective in three years. A rare accomplishment. Her progression had allowed her to quit her government career early, enjoying the opportunity to open a private agency in her late twenties. A year later into her business, and now entering her thirties, she had seen many things—in both the public and private sector—and this case smelled like trouble.

Old money, powerful players and a rebellious victim—all blending together to create a game with hidden cards played behind her back. Lourina's warning senses tingled; she really did not want to take this case. *Damn these suits!*

"He didn't even flinch when I told him I was an unarmed investigator!" Lourina suddenly

smacked her steering wheel in annoyance. “Why didn’t his team look for a PI that is licensed to carry a gun? What, are they afraid I might shoot the brat?”

Lourina had given up carrying firearms the day she resigned from the police. She still had a few pistols stashed around her office and her apartment in case of an emergency of course—like someone she’d arrested in the past coming to visit—but she had applied specifically for the unarmed license when starting her business. Knowing that she was unarmed forced Lourina to work cautiously, giving her a personal reason to justify turning down risky assignments and instead focus on de-escalation techniques. *Let someone else handle that crap,* she would often remind herself. *Don’t become reliant on tools. Improvise and adapt.*

Lourina debated whether to contact Mr. Kim and say, “thank you, but no thank you” to his offer. But the reward was just too great. The money blinded her risk-taking calculations.

She needed it.

Still, the more Lourina thought about the case, the more frustrated she became. She began to realize how little she knew about what was going on.

…

Arriving back at her office, Lourina found herself in an unusually foul mood. Walking through the door, she observed one of her red fish staring absently at her. She did not appreciate having the audience right now and her anger slipped.

“Shut up, Alex,” Lourina grumbled. She was in no mood for Alex’s shit right now, blubbing away ignorantly while staying in his comfy tank, all safe and content with (his?) simple life.

Storming past the fish tank, Lourina paused. Feeling frustrated by her outburst, she guiltily

looked back to make sure Alex didn't have silver on his fin tips. He didn't. This realization allowed Lourina to feel slightly better after knowing she had insulted the "proper" fish. Charles swam up next.

"You too," she warned the small accomplice. "Don't start."

What sort of detective can't remember the names of four fish? An intrusive thought pierced her mind and cut unexpectedly deep. She felt shocked to her core.

"Fuck you!" Lourina shouted back in the hopes of silencing her thoughts. The quiet office, except for the bubbles from the fish tank, were the only responses the world gave her outburst.

After a few heartbeats, Lourina started to practice deep breathing techniques to calm herself. *Breathing in,* she told herself as she breathed. *I am breathing in.* Lourina held her breath for a second before breathing out just as slowly. *Breathing out: I am breathing out.*

Repeating these mantras to herself allowed Lourina to anchor her mind and emotions together. Her heartbeat regained its composure and her breathing returned to its normal rhythm. She allowed her eyes to wander across her office and take in the views, hopeful to discover something that would help her think.

Unfortunately, the first thing she noticed was the photo of the other missing person—the one she had been searching for before Santiago's man had entered her office earlier today. This photo reminded Lourina that she was now actively looking for two missing persons by herself.

These thoughts felt like crushing boulders in her mind, causing her to debate whether to look for both victims or to call the family of her first victim and explain to them that she could no longer take their case. But she couldn't do that. She refused.

Suddenly light-headed, Lourina grabbed some of the government food vouchers laying on her desk. She begrudgingly walked out of her office, rezipped her purple hoodie, and locked the door

behind her. She then roamed the streets of Tacoma in search of a distraction. The fresh air from the Puget Sound cleared her head and cleansed her mind. The evergreen trees across the city, and the calm waters.

Along the way the investigator noticed a few of her “contacts,” people she knew who lived off the streets. She would often pass along her excess food vouchers to them, a form of donating that made Lourina feel better about herself, while also getting occasional benefits in return. Whispers, for example, often flowed from the streets and into Lourina’s ears.

These contacts also warned the others who roamed the streets that Lourina was someone who was kind to them—and she was to be left alone. Because of her reputation, even as a former cop, Lourina freely walked in the streets alone and without much worry.

Back when she had worked in law enforcement, Lourina could count on her team being there for her. There was always someone she could talk to, to confide in, or to ask for advice. But alone? She had to learn how to embrace the “fog of war” when it came to investigations. Now her only conversations were with strangers at bars, contacts on the streets, or former cops who occasionally kept in contact. She had to play nice, think, and then act.

Almost catching her foot against the curb and tripping, Lourina’s mind snapped back to her reality and she became aware of her surroundings. She had been wandering the city for nearly an hour now and the dark winter’s night was starting to take hold while streetlights slowly flickered on from their automatic sensors. Looking around before her, the investigator noticed a sign for a new business across the street: Delta Delights, a small, local restaurant that appeared to sell burgers, fries, and other classic American foods with a twist. She could smell the food from outside. It was mouthwatering.

Suddenly hungry, Lourina approached the store and skimmed the menu taped to the window.

After a few moments of consideration, Lourina felt satisfied with trying someplace new to eat.

She opened the door and walked across floor mats displaying a delta symbol. She carried enough food vouchers in her pocket to get a decent meal anywhere—after all, they were redeemable for specific meal values, and enough vouchers could make any combination of meals into a reality. The atmosphere inside Delta Delights was calm, inviting, and wholesome—a welcome change from the cold and corporate experience Lourina had undergone earlier today.

Letting the woman behind the counter escort her towards a booth, Lourina thanked the waitress before sitting down at her assigned seat. She scanned the restaurant with curiosity, allowing her eyes to look around while her head remained pointing down towards the menu, just in case she recognized anyone in the restaurant and needed time to think.

The woman from the counter called out to someone else in Spanish—possibly the kitchen—to alert them about their new customer. But the conversation was relaxed, like a happy family talking to each other. Lourina spoke Spanish fluently, although she rarely used it anymore outside of work after leaving Yakima to go to a nearby university over a decade ago.

While Lourina did not know these people, the kindness in their interaction warmed her soul after dealing with Mr. Kim's earlier dismissiveness towards his son. It almost reminded her of…

Wait, Lourina now realized. *Mr. Kim never talked about a deadline!*

Not only was Mr. Kim unconcerned with David's disappearance, he also never informed the investigator of when he expected any results. Lourina pulled out her mobile device from her pocket and reviewed the non-disclosure contract from earlier.

She was right. There was no mention of the contract expiring, or of any due dates, only that payment would not occur "until the completion of the assignment" or the "cancellation of the contract by either party."

Mulling over her discovery, Lourina made a determination.

Well then, I suppose David Kim can enjoy his freedom a little longer. A trickster's smile grew across her lips. *And I can finish my current case before I return to deal with the Kim's. I can do this.*

And with that, Lourina Sanches allowed herself to relax. When the woman from the counter returned to ask Lourina for her meal choice, the investigator splurged. She handed the woman all of her remaining government vouchers from her pocket. "Surprise me," Lourina challenged. The waiter looked more than surprised.

She decided she would distribute her leftovers to any contacts she encountered along her walk back.

Time to experiment, Lourina committed herself. And with that, PI Sanches returned her mind to solving the disappearance of her initial case.

One step at a time, Lourina.

CHAPTER 4 — BENSON

THEODORE'S MIND WAS BLANK. The assassin felt the occasional rain drop yet his eyes remained fixed on the faded sign below. His ears detected the sounds of a nearby waterfall and his nose smelled the trees and land before him. For some reason, his mind was stalled, it was a clean slate. And what should have been an otherwise boring plaque on a public trail had him frozen in place.

SIMON BENSON

1851 - 1942

LUMBERMAN AND PHILANTHROPIST

Theodore's drive from Portland to Richland was planned to be nonstop, a few hours at most. Yet thirty minutes into his drive the man found himself subconsciously exiting the interstate. His actions surprised him. He rarely did anything without due consideration, not until recently. Yet it somehow felt… automatic?

Now slightly off I-84, Multnomah Falls poured a powerful current onto the rocks below it and created multiple beautiful waterfalls. *What the hell,* Theodore had reasoned to himself earlier while parking, *the day is still young. Why not get some more fresh air?*

Theodore R. Hudson—still technically Chad Woodard until he could dispose of the evidence—observed his mind swirling between the present moment and the night before. He remembered dealing with his victim's body, getting burned by Mr. Gordon, and then finally deciding to drive down to Portland, Oregon to spend the night.

While he had initially waited in his room for his scheduled food delivery, Theodore later

surveyed the hotel (also coincidently named after Simon Benson) in case of an emergency. Getting burned by his employer had caused the man's paranoia to increase exponentially. He felt restless, needing to explore. He roamed the hotel and memorized the layout, gathering ideas for escape and evasion—just in case his former employer decided to make his termination notice permanent.

While walking down the stairwell of the hotel, Theodore had noticed countless photos and awards hanging off the walls; memories the hotel wished to share with their guests. While most of the decorations were photographs of famous visitors or local attractions, one photograph caught Theodore's attention unexpectedly.

Before Theodore displayed a black-and-white photograph of Multnomah Falls, highlighting how the falls were purchased by Mr. Benson and gifted to the city of Portland to create a public park. Mr. Benson was reportedly beloved by locals because of his philanthropy, later being quoted as having said:

"No one has the right to die

and not leave something to the public and for the public good."

Normally, Theodore would have ignored such a photo in the halls and the resulting plaque on the trails. But he had walked across that very bridge over a decade ago.

He found himself remembering his arms entwined with his former lover, the two of them laughing and joking as they climbed to observe the falls. He even remembered the date well: February 13, 2016, the day before Valentine's. And he remembered the letter he'd received from her in the mail, not long after he left Portland:

"Thanks for all the fun times."

The old memory filled his hollow chest with ruminating pain. While Theodore remembered all of his former lovers, and had long ago accepted his past, the unexpected combination of his emotional state and his former memories made him feel strange.

Emotions can be dangerous, acting as fuel and prone to ignition. But they also brought life, creating new from the old. While the assassin had done well to suppress his feelings throughout his life, today was not a normal day.

Last night he'd felt nothing while reading the sign in the hotel. But now while staring down at the faded sign from the public park, gears were turning in odd directions inside his head. And through the friction a spark was lit. Theodore found himself feeling swayed in the moment and giving in to his emotions.

I was burned, Theodore realized to himself. Rage swirled inside him, sloshing around like gasoline being funneled into his now-burning heart. Countless years of pent-up aggression had finally found its leak. It was ready to go. And so was Theodore.

I was burned.

BURNED!

A fire grew out of control inside him. Memories began to flood back. Steam expanded.

When Theodore had been burned before, his former employer did not survive past the night. Not out of vengeance from the assassin, but because the employer had made the fatal mistake to deliver Theodore's termination notice through the barrel of a gun. Unfortunately for his former employer, Theodore was faster in sending his response.

Now Theodore found himself going into a trance: an equilibrium of body, mind, and emotion.

He could once again feel that love from a decade ago, his former lover's embrace. It was another type of burning passion. He could remember feeling *happy.* He could remember feeling *alive*. His lungs took a deep breath to confirm this assessment. It felt amazing.

"I love you," Theodore whispered softly to himself, quiet enough so that no one walking nearby could overhear his words.

None of the passing hikers or transients paid him any attention, anyway. His mind was grasping at the memories of his former lover here at Multnomah Falls, temporarily unable and unwilling to let her go. His heart was in agony and numb from a long slumber. "Thank you for the memories," he whispered to himself as he projected her image into his current reality, seeing her once again before him.

The corporate assassin treasured these moments and allowed them to wash over him. Still, he knew that chasing memories would eventually invite pain, so Theodore forced these moments to slowly fade from his mind. He did not want to, but he had to. His lover slowly disappeared from his reality yet again. But while the man had accepted his past, something had broken inside him. How he viewed the present moment had changed.

Concentrating on the fire inside him, Theodore embraced the warmth. He loved it. Cherished it. It was energizing him. Fueling him. As if an engine was active, stable, and ready to be used. The gears in his mind churned faster and started to reach higher rotations, an old factory returning to life and hungry for new material.

First things first, Theodore returned his voice to his mind, *employment.* Now that he was expecting only half of his reward, he needed a new boss to keep paying the bills. After all, it could be weeks, maybe months, between kills. But who should he reach out to? And was going back to Renee's Regale to get what he was owed worth the trouble? Should he right that wrong, too?

A labyrinth of complex ideas spun within his head. Costs and benefits intertwining as visual webs. Networks appeared before him out of a lifetime of connections. Availability of resources compiled: money, fake identities, tools, stashes, and escape houses. Threads of imagination—intersecting for his amusement—allowed him to mentally pull hard and find what held.

No, he reasoned, *leave Mr. Gordon behind. Move forward. The past is the past.*

From his peripheral vision, a fluttering in the wind caught Theodore's attention and grounded the assassin's concentration back to the physical world around him. It was as if a bolt of lightning had found the path of least resistance. An improperly discarded pile of trash laid near the trail, a used magazine becoming the lightning rod of his attention. Flashy colors fading into the earth flaunted themselves for consumer attention.

Ever since the last economic collapse, trash had begun to accumulate all over the world. Yet in this specific trash pile, a colorful page showed a few recent headlines:

DEVINE INVESTMENT GROUP DIGS UP GOLD!

LITHIUM DEPOSIT DISCOVERED IN CANADA:

DIG READY TO BEGIN

"AUCK" LAND? YUCK! TRY RICH PORT INSTEAD.

REMEMBER THE PUERTO RICO:

WITH SANTIAGO'S HIT DEALS

Seeing these headlines reminded Theodore of his past internal debates on whether to leave the country. He had missed exploring the world back in his youth. But to Theodore, these thoughts

felt more like escapism than reality.

Could he ever truly leave?

Besides, after the USS *Puerto Rico* incident, Theodore realized that no place was safe from the insanity that surrounded him. He sighed upon seeing the trash on the beautiful trail—as if it stole the wind from his sails. It was an uncomfortable reminder of his world being ravaged by climate change and fueling fanaticism.

His memories from his slumber began to return. So many years asleep. So many incidents like with the *Puerto Rico*.

New Zealand, a gorgeous island country neighboring Australia, had enjoyed a long-standing relationship with the United States. However, due to New Zealand's anti-nuclear policies, frustration had grown between the nations.

To protect itself from nuclear threats, New Zealand simply rejected the game that was offered to it; if they never owned any nuclear weapons, they reasoned, no one would ever target them with nuclear weapons. It worked.

But for New Zealand, the country needed to ensure they remained free of nuclear weapons completely. They started to reject any ships carrying nuclear weapons from using their ports—including from allies. New Zealand believed that other countries would consider their cities a justifiable target should they begin "storing" such weapons within their borders, including their ports.

Theodore did not know the whole story about the Auckland Incident, but after seeing the paper before him referencing it, Theodore found himself ruminating. *Hell, that stupid captain who created that mess—what was his name? Jones? He's now employed by Santiago!*

As far as Theodore could recall, both countries were otherwise at peace before the incident.

They allowed themselves international trade, military assistance, and other forms of unity—provided the U.S. keep its nuclear weapons away from New Zealand's ports. This arrangement worked for decades.

But when the USS *Puerto Rico*, a new—and controversial—Super PAC submarine, experienced malfunctions off the coast of New Zealand, the boat—allegedly—demanded that New Zealand allow their submarine priority access to dock and repair.

New Zealand, still recovering from a catastrophic earthquake, later determined that neither the nuclear submarine nor its crew were in immediate danger and could therefore safely reach a port in Australia under its own power instead. They denied the request to dock, stating they needed every dock available for emergency relief.

According to a later FOMO News article, New Zealand's refusal was the "straw that broke the camel's back." Despite a long history of exceptionalism within the U.S. submarine forces, their reputation and training had begun to erode. Budget cuts, lack of serious conflicts, and increasing privatization of the United States military had fertilized political infighting. It fermented competitive behavior between officers, along with shoddy contracting work, mixing together, creating unexpected incidents at rapidly increasing frequencies.

Politics now overrode professionalism.

Captain Jones was reportedly "under intense pressure" by his chain of command to maintain nuclear readiness. Mostly to make his superiors look good, Theodore was sure. To accomplish this objective, Jones made his crews work harder than he preferred, along with making his new boat run longer than it should. And eventually, a serious—but not critical—malfunction occurred on the *Puerto Rico*, the third boat of the new (and absurdly named) class.

While the Pentagon never announced what had caused the malfunction, leaked news reports

later uncovered that it was all due to improper contractor installation during the submarine's founding.

Captain Jones, unsure of the extent of the damage, determined he needed a safe port immediately, costs be damned. His superiors at the Pacific Submarine Force agreed. He received permission from his chain of command to find a dock in New Zealand, saying they would handle any political fallout for him. Or something like that. Theodore's memories of the events were a little fuzzy. *It's been a while.*

To summarize a long story: New Zealand relented, but did not appreciate this. A fist fight later broke out between a few sailors on the docks. Someone panicked—both countries claim it was the other—and weapons were drawn by the young and nervous.

While the guns eventually went away, and no one was shot, Captain Jones was detained by New Zealand's government pending an investigation. In return for "capturing" their captain, a small crew of American sailors detained a few Royal New Zealand Navy sailors and placed them inside the *Puerto Rico's* brig unless they released their captain, causing New Zealand to blockade the boat from leaving its port until everything could be settled.

And before this insanity could end, politicians from both countries smelled blood in the water: patriotic blood. Fuel that could be used in their upcoming elections as external distractions from their internal issues. Politicians capitalized on the incident in hours.

Theodore groaned. He remembered the skyrocketing prices that resulted after the United States imposed a return blockade on New Zealand. The resulting instability within the shipping industry had caused the price of goods to rise globally. Yet after the blockade was lifted, corporations discovered that they enjoyed these new prices.

They became the new normal.

A month of stupidity, Theodore thought to himself, *and no one even died on the boat! All for what? Ego?*

The Auckland Incident installed a frenzy in the public. It provided governments and corporations with renewed interest in nationalism and capitalism, respectfully. In the United States, for example, a slogan was created: “Remember the Puerto Rico!” Apparently, the irony of this statement’s usage in relation with the historical context of “Remember the Maine!” had failed to materialize within the public’s consciousness—most likely due to neglected funding of history classes over the decades—as millions of Americans would happily chant the slogan without any sense of irony.

Media stations like FOMO News, of course, loved it.

While Theodore did not know whether this next part was true—because the news became increasingly censored following the activation of the “war powers of the President” as the incident went on—but he remembered reading how a conspiracy theory had grown within New Zealand about the *Puerto Rico* incident. Apparently, despite starting off as a joke, the conspiracy theory had become serious, believing that the whole incident was actually Australia’s fault. This did not make sense to Theodore, but the conspiracy was slowly growing on the island nation.

Still staring at the plaque before him, Theodore was grateful the submarine hadn't been named after, say, Texas. *God only knows how crazy things might have gone then,* he mused. Witnessing this rabid fever capture his country, all for a territory few could place on a map, had shocked the man. Suddenly people seemed to care about the island of Puerto Rico. Well, they pretended to at least.

Following the blockade, Captain Jones was publicly promoted to Rear Admiral (but quietly forced into retirement), and corporations saw stock prices rise like a tsunami wave. Admiral Jones,

still going by “Captain” in public, rode out the patriotic fever and joined the corporate world immediately. One especially cunning executive—a young and upcoming Tyler Santiago—poached the captain for his company. He had plans.

Tyler Santiago created Santiago’s Hospitality Industries and Technologies—otherwise known as Santiago’s HIT—in Seattle overnight. While the man had been born in Puerto Rico, he’d never returned to the island after leaving it in his youth. Instead, he apparently cashed in on his lineage, as far as Theodore was concerned. It all felt fake to the man, like a politician underneath.

Entire sectors of the territory’s economy—hotels, cruises, restaurants, and so on—were quickly purchased by shell companies. It drowned the island in financial offers far above market value, washing away any resistance. All for Mr. Santiago.

By taking advantage of the sudden global interest in the island, expensive charter packages were created for exclusive resorts. People flocked to the island to hear speeches by the former captain, to see the beautiful island, and to avoid giving any of their money to those damn “foreign” islands like, say, New Zealand.

And, of course, Mr. Santiago appeared to profit heavily from all of this. His fellow Puerto Ricans, meanwhile, did not. The island had become his playground according to online analysis. Just like Seattle. And soon, the rest of the country.

Theodore had monitored this political and corporate insanity with curiosity back in the days, as the resulting chaos had created lucrative contracts for him during businesses mergers. More billionaires began to pop up over the globe. More capital was hoarded. And now, after Theodore saw that pile of trash with the paper flashing hot deals for Puerto Rico, the man was truly out of place and time. How long had he been sleeping? *Who am I?*

Still staring at the faded sign of Simon Benson, Theodore found himself contemplating what a

"philanthropist" even meant. Was Mr. Benson actually a philanthropist? Or was he an earlier version of Tyler Santiago: merely donating his wealth upon his death to clean up a legacy? Theodore did not know the answer to this. But Theodore did know a few things:

1. The world was fucked; and,

2. Theodore had a very particular set of skills.

Drops of rain continued to trickle onto Theodore as a light rain front edged into the area. He mentally imagined steam rising off his body, his inner fire burning the liquid to simulate what he felt inside. While no steam rose off the man, a flash of inspiration did appear within his mind. A thought that offered him a way to piece everything together:

3. Theodore was now free.

There were no more rules left to hold Theodore R. Hudson back. No more games to play or asses to kiss. He finally realized that the only thing that had been holding him back this entire time… had been himself! All of his suppressed emotions, memories, and choices were of his own doing. Which meant that he could also undo them. Which meant that Theodore could:

4. Profit from the situation.

He returned his attention to the magazine, now becoming soaked by the rain. Soon the page would dissolve and return to the earth, wiping away the debt it had incurred upon the environment. With his mind still wandering, Theodore again thought about the inscription he read last night:

"No one has the right to die

and not leave something to the public and for the public good."

Theodore R. Hudson enjoyed a dishonest living. But in that moment he reached a conclusion

through his warped mental calculus: He needed to earn his right to die. And to do so, Theodore needed to leave something behind for the public. Whatever it was, it needed to be *substantial.*

And while his eyes stared at the text leaking off the cheap magazine, he concentrated specifically on Devine digging up gold. *Gold*?

A few minutes passed in silence before Theodore—standing alone in the rain—mentally thanked Multnomah Falls and the memories of his ex one last time. Tourists passed by the man, unaware that they were witnessing a historical event, an eventual change to their own reality.

Mr. Hudson, privately channeling his renewed energy, embraced the combustion within his chest. He happily walked back to "Mr. Woodard's" car and left his guard down: His drive back to Richland was going to be far more interesting than he had anticipated.

And he would need more time to prepare his next steps.

Such as reminding someone about the Golden Rule.

CHAPTER 5 — DAVID

WHERE ARE YOU, YOU LITTLE SHIT?

Lourina stared intently at the crowd roaming before her, monitoring them while they disembarked from the local ferry. Sitting alone at her table outside, she slowly drank her coffee in hidden frustration. Crowds of passengers lazily shifted and moved through the customs terminal before splitting off to their next destination. Lourina scowled at all of them from afar.

The MV *Coho*, a passenger and vehicle ferry, is one of the connections between the Canadian city of Victoria, British Columbia, and the American state of Washington. While the *Coho* is the only ferry doing this route from Port Angeles, it was not the only ship that traveled between the Canadian island and the continental United States. But to Lourina, the *Coho* had made "the most sense."

A few days earlier, an old connection from her law enforcement career had passed along a tip—a simple description of an "asshole tourist" causing problems in Victoria. The description of said asshole tourist conveniently matched the file of her trust-fund baby on the run. However, the legal identity of said tourist did *not* match. Therefore, Lourina took a gamble on whether to stake out this port on a hunch that this tourist might actually be her target.

She had mentally imagined herself as some spoiled rich boy in his mid-twenties who wanted to hide from his parents—oh, and having a father with more power than entire nations—which led to Lourina considering some unique possibilities.

While how it occurred was beyond her understanding, Lourina knew that corporations could forge identities that could fool governments. But even forged documents could be discovered under scrutiny, as customs officers were especially astute at finding such discrepancies.

So rather than risk going through a massive customs facility in Seattle, or through international

airports, or even by the U.S.- Canadian border, why not go and sneak through a lesser-used crossing full of locals and tourists? As long as you remained committed to your identity, customs would probably leave you alone.

These past few days had given Lourina ample time to think about this case. She had quickly found her original missing person—alive, thankfully—but with the unfortunate twist in her case that always ruined her day: Her missing person wasn't missing; rather, the lady didn't want to be found. She had run away.

These cases were morally confusing for Lourina. *Which side do I help?* She would contemplate her options, weighing the pros and the cons. Typically, there was the distraught family that paid you to find and bring home their loved ones; meanwhile, there were the loved ones that were desperate enough to uproot their entire lives to give themselves a fresh start through escaping.

Thankfully, Lourina had worked long enough in this field to find a solution that worked out well for everyone—well, enough to minimize the drama and close out the case, anyway.

PI Sanches informed the missing woman that she understood her situation and asked that the women simply record a message on Lourina's device to explain the situation for her family. Lourina then requested that the woman list off things that only her family would know—along with her personal justifications as to why she wanted to leave—to ensure that no one could claim the recording was artificial.

Finally, Lourina provided the woman with a physical copy of her families' contact info on it, just in case the lady ever forgot their details and wanted to call home.

And Lourina even waived the fee for the family. They would keep their vouchers this time, as Lourina wanted to get started on her second case: her big fish to catch.

However, much to Lourina's dismay, the case of David Kim was appearing to head in a similar

direction. Lourina had never met David before and she had no idea what his version of events would be. Did he run away often to cause trouble, or to escape it?

And if the same situation were to happen again as with her last case—where Lourina has to make a choice between families—could she throw away an entire year of rent to help someone… even someone who frustrated her? Someone who went on mindless vacations that could pay for her office lease outright?

Her contract did stipulate that payment would only occur if she was able to pass along information that successfully led to David's safe return; therefore, Lourina doubted she would get paid if she let David go. *Stop,* she mentally scolded herself. *Worry about that later. Find David first.*

"Need a refill?" a waiter passing by Lourina inquired casually. He kept moving, not waiting for her to respond, before picking up a dirty plate from a nearby table.

"No, thank you," Lourina replied. She was grateful this place wasn't busy as it allowed her to concentrate while also viewing the custom's terminal. She also realized how fortunate she was, considering her target took the ferry by foot and not by vehicle, otherwise Lourina would never know if her target had snuck past her through a shaded window. Therefore, the PI assumed her target was likely to return by foot as well.

The only thing Lourina did not like about this place, though, was the parking as she had been required to leave her car in a nearby parking lot two blocks away. This complicated things: if David was traveling with friends, for example, they might have a driver ready to pick them up from the terminal, forcing PI Sanches to play a dangerous game of catch-up.

Anything could go wrong: another car could block her from exiting the parking lot, or the target vehicle could slip away, or she could get discovered by David if she drove too recklessly to catch

up, and so on.

Regardless, it was time to move. Lourina tipped her server a few dollars on top of her vouchers and started to fiddle with her purse, pretending to be packing up. She didn't need to pretend, but it allowed her to blend into the crowd while also giving her fidgeting hands something to do.

While her head remained looking down, her eyes were sharply fixed on the terminal's exit. Her hands now reached for her polarized aviator sunglasses, extracting them, and latching the purse closed.

This case keeps getting more complicated. Canada? Lourina remembered feeling flabbergasted when she first heard the tip. This complicated things for her, as she only investigated within Washington State. Now her target was outside the state—hell, her target was outside the country. Otherwise Lourina would have simply visited Victoria herself to verify… but going past customs was too risky for her taste. Yet for someone with international connections like David Kim, it was not.

Lourina quickly spotted a break in the crowd ahead of a small group of young adults exiting the terminal, dressed in designer clothes and talking loudly and obnoxiously amongst each other. This cohort caused other passengers to move slowly out of their way.

Lourina held her breath—this was the moment of truth. The moment that would make-or-break her day. Her information, based on her target's entry form to Canada, stated he would return to the US within the next few days. Lourina hedged her bets and staked out the port one day earlier than his original estimated date, just in case "Keith David"—yes, his new identity was literally Keith David, the international celebrity—decided to end his vacation early.

Either Lourina was about to see a world-famous movie star amongst a crowd of models (which would not be completely unexpected given the situation, despite the physical mismatch) or she

was about to find her missing person. Lourina pondered to herself how absurd this case was. She had become increasingly confused over time as to how David could pass through customs with such a dumb identity.

But for now, it was time to verify her target. It was not, however, the time for her to question her series of fortunate events.

Lourina stood up from her outdoor seat and walked towards the terminal along the sidewalk. Timing here was going to be critical. Her car was across the street and her path would allow her to visually inspect the crowd. If her target wasn't David Kim then Lourina would feign taking a phone call and act natural to provide her with some time to think. Now moving along the sidewalk, she—

What was that?

Lourina's senses went on full alert; an uncomfortable feeling developing from within. While looking both ways for vehicles, her subconscious mind noticed something from *behind* her, like a shadow. This observation caused Lourina to momentarily lose her balance. She immediately recovered, thankfully, by playing it off as though she had accidentally stepped "the wrong way" and temporarily tripped herself. Not falling—just a slightly awkward shuffle.

No one seemed to notice. Well, no one that she could see. *Focus on David,* Lourina warned herself. *You're getting jittery from all that caffeine. Look, here comes the group.*

She wanted to turn around and check behind her real quick, just to put her mind at ease, but her mission came first. *Besides, it's unlikely to be dangerous.*

There is no way something would happen in front of a federal facility… right?

"Oh my god, David!" a blonde model was overheard exclaiming loudly from within the crowd. The woman was dressed like a display store mannequin, as thin as one could be without flying

away into the breeze, and a touch lighter in the head. Lourina risked a glance at the commotion, pretending to be a tourist.

And her glance caused Lourina to softly chuckle to herself. *There is no fucking way,* she told herself. *How is this my lucky day?*

Directly in front of her was, in fact, the missing David Kim—absolutely not trying to hide his identity. While Lourina did not know what had warranted the other woman's gasp moments ago, it was apparently insignificant to the group.

The gaggle of models continued on, discussing random subjects with one another, taking their time to walk about and loudly exclaim amongst their herd.

And David, our star, was in the middle of the flock.

He wore strange designer clothes, and even stranger pants, all in black and white. There was no way Lourina could lose him on foot now. *This is just too easy.*

PI Sanches had struck gold. Satisfied, she returned her attention to what was in front of her and continued to her car. She wasn't going to let her golden fish get away. Until she was able to keep on top of David, her rent could disappear.

Now approaching her car, Lourina—

There it was again! That *sensation*. An uncomfortable chill ran along her spine. She was better prepared this time and didn't let the sensation distract her, but now she was openly scanning for danger, as getting two signals like that spelled "danger" and "escape" should not be ignored.

Lourina glanced around her, acting like a nervous woman approaching her car while alone in a parking lot. It was unnecessary, considering the parking lot was empty—the day was bright and sunny—and there were police nearby, but Lourina used the paranoia as a cover to find the real threat. Scanning, and…

Nothing. Even while wearing her sunglasses, Lourina detected nothing out of the ordinary. And that was strange considering these experiences were definitely *not* ordinary! Thoughts began to swirl in her head along with new options: *abort?*

Finding David gave Lourina more than enough satisfaction with her case. If she could find him this easily then she could find him again later. Maybe until she could figure out what was occurring with her sensations she might simply "cut bait" and let David go for now. Unlocking her car, Lourina made herself a promise: three strikes and she will get out of here. For now, that meant she could continue with her plan—provided the sensation didn't occur a third time.

Retrieving her car and parking around the corner, Lourina waited for David's gaggle to gather their vehicle… and nothing interesting happened. Well, except for the slightly amusing drama that happened when the (presumably) least popular member of the group was suddenly exiled and forced to walk the audacious trek across an empty street to retrieve the parked luxury sport utility vehicle on behalf of the herd. Lourina wondered why they had not taken their vehicle with them to Canada in the first place. *Hmm…*

Lourina flicked her eyes to her dashcam, ensuring it was recording so that she could review the information later if necessary. This would allow her to find David again should he disappear, provided Lourina did not scare him enough to change his patterns and behavior. She needed David to believe he wasn't being followed.

She also needed to wait before she could alert Mr. Kim, as David needed to be stationary—such as spending the night at a friend's place or at a hotel—to give Mr. Kim's crew time to pick him up.

Mr. Alan Kim had previously remarked that the "delivery" of his son would be "uneventful:" there would be some shouting by David over the "indignation" of the situation, meanwhile the

team would wait out his temper tantrum by offering him some “brownies” in return to go home. They would then drive David back to his mansion on Mercer Island with soothing music and the occasional stop for food along the way.

Despite how shady Mr. Kim was, Lourina fully believed the man when it came to this final part of the plan. Any concerns she had about David’s safety disappeared once she saw him in person. But Lourina was still troubled as to why she had been chosen to find David, why it had been so easy, and now why she felt those two earlier alerts. Clearly there was something more going on behind the scenes, and the faster Lourina could complete her contract the faster she could get back to her fish. *Back to Alex, maybe?*

Lourina watched with minor amusement as the group of beautiful people slowly settled into their black SUV. The monstrosity blocked a few cars behind them because of how long the models were taking to get settled inside. Even a few nearby cops, standing together in a group, watched the SUV with curiosity.

No, Lourina realized, *back to Brad*. *Alex is still on my shit list.* She didn’t remember which fish was Alex though, just that he made *the list*.

…

Following the SUV down Washington’s scenic Highway 101, Lourina determined the group was clearly unworried about hiding. They drove recklessly and sped past the evergreens and expansive ocean, without any clear destination in mind. The SUV would occasionally pull off the highway—momentarily causing PI Sanches to wonder if she had been spotted—before the gaggle would stop at some scenic place to give them enough time to take an unfathomable amount of

photos.

While David appeared quite absent-minded and enjoying the moment, the entire situation continued to water the seeds of doubt that grew within Lourina's mind. *There is no way his father couldn't find this genius,* she stewed to herself. She was now waiting for the entourage to resume their road trip after their latest photo stop. Their fifth, specifically.

Lourina was grateful law enforcement had not tried to pull either vehicle over; she had been struggling to keep up with the speeding SUV and staying hidden at the same time.

A dark thought crossed Lourina's mind: *Am I being set up?*

Paranoia breached the investigator, who was unable to determine why none of this was making any sense. Once again, her mind questioned whether she had become an enemy of Santiago.

But neither did that make any sense: why play this game with her? While she could defend herself, she also knew that Santiago's HIT had enough resources to remove "troublesome" individuals like her. They already knew her office location and had had ample opportunities this week to set up an accident.

Unless, of course, this remote and scenic route is *the accident…*

Lourina wanted to verbalize these thoughts out loud to herself, but her growing paranoia commanded her mouth to stay quiet. Her mind could not fathom why, but it complied, so all of her thoughts continued to swirl internally.

For the first time, PI Sanches regretted applying for an unarmed license to investigate. *A gun wouldn't stop whatever might be happening, but at least I could go down fighting.*

Worst of all, Lourina realized that she was in too deep already. To a novice, they might tell her to quit the contract, escape, move on. But Lourina knew that whatever was happening was already in motion, a series of fortunate—or unfortunate—events. She could either continue to follow

through with David until the end, or drive home, but either way whomever was involved clearly knew about her. And this could make her a target.

If David was being tailed by an assassin, for example, they might mistake PI Sanches for being some sort of undercover security that needed to be dealt with first. *How cruel.*

Okay, she grounded herself, *let's finish this.* Whatever was going to happen next, Lourina wanted to face it head-on and get it out of the way. *Finish your objective, Sanches.*

•••

Four hours had passed since the "missing" David Kim and his cohort had commandeered a luxury SUV from Port Angeles and begun their expedition down Highway 101.

Lourina was beginning to worry whether this little road trip might last all day. Hell, they still had a few hours of sunlight left! While driving for long periods of time did not bother her, it was mentally and physically taxing to remain so alert. Also, she needed to maintain vigilance with monitoring her fuel. She couldn't just pull up next to them at a gas station whenever they did. Fortunately, SUVs are gas-guzzlers, and the group did not appear to care about how much fuel they were wasting, so Lourina estimated she had about twice their driving range.

But luck was still on Lourina's side today, as her target SUV suddenly pulled off near Ocean Shores and began to head towards a resort. *Bingo,* Lourina smiled to herself. *They must be tired of each other. They have been traveling for so long. Someone made a reservation.*

David's SUV dropped him and his friends off in front of the resort before handing their keys to the valet to park on their behalf. Lourina was exhausted yet she remained alert to finish the final stretch of her watch.

Now was the final countdown, whereby she would wait for half an hour to see if David would

try and leave before she could make her call. This countdown gave Lourina time to think about what had occurred this week and about how she would like to finalize this contract. It was so close.

A year of rent! Her mouth watered.

Lourina also took the time to get back into her head, trying to see whether she could piece together what had occurred back in Port Angeles. Were those just random experiences? Maybe she saw something unrelated, like a federal undercover investigation for something else, and Lourina merely noticed the oddities in her surroundings? She had constantly scanned the highway while following the SUV, hoping to notice anything that could make sense of what was happening. But nothing seemed out of the ordinary. No repeating or trailing vehicles, for example.

Glancing down at her wristwatch, Lourina realized enough time had passed to satisfy her personal rule of waiting. Relieved that David wasn't going anywhere, she pulled out her phone and called the number that was designated as her point of contact.

The phone rang. And rang again. Eventually it went to voicemail.

"What?" Lourina was shocked. *Why are they not monitoring the number?*

Once the machine indicated it was ready to take her message, Lourina was out of patience and wanted to get this all over with.

"This is Lourina Sanches," she began, "I found David." She gave a brief message: listing the resort location, car make, model, license number, acquaintances and their descriptions, along with mentioning how she was "standing by" for confirmation of her message. She hung up the phone unceremoniously and placed it down on her lap.

A few minutes passed by while Lourina monitored the resort. Her eyes swiveled between the entrances, roads, and other routes that she could determine were nearby—just in case David tried anything funny. She also kept a lookout for anyone acting suspicious. She did, however, feel

slightly better now that she was parked in a richer area, as it was unlikely someone would try to do anything dangerous here. She had no enemies out in Ocean Shores. Yet.

Still, Lourina made sure to keep her car turned on while remaining parked, ready to escape with a clear route in front of her in moments. She'd also purposefully parked her car in front of multiple cameras; hopeful their presence would deter any shenanigans… or at the very least provide enough evidence for the police to find her body afterwards.

After all, there was no way in hell PI Sanches would let herself go missing. It was a point of pride for her. And the thought of another firm—like those jackasses over at Bright Falls—having the satisfaction of searching for their competitor's body? No way. Hell, Lourina bet they would take her case for free. Just for the fun of it.

"Those spiteful bastards," she said resentfully.

But while her luck for the day had been exceptional, it appeared to finally run out. Lourina glanced up, noticing something that made her heart stop momentarily: David was leaving the resort… and heading towards a waiting SUV.

A different SUV. Along with a middle-aged man escorting the clearly unhappy David Kim. A man Lourina had never seen before. *What the fuck?* PI Sanches thought in alarm. She had just alerted his father of his location and David was already on the move? And who the hell was with him? It couldn't be his father's man; Mercer Island was too far away from here!

Is David leaving? Or in danger? These thoughts pierced her mind. Her breathing intensified, a surge of energy coursing through her body. *No, this can't be happening,* she objected. *I was so close.* Her brain cranked into overdrive as her options flashed before her. Call the number again? Or maybe call the police this time?

But Lourina couldn't call law enforcement—not yet anyway. Not because David's father

wanted to keep this quiet, but because David had just committed multiple felonies by crossing national borders under false identification. If she called the police, they might eventually put the story together. And thus PI Sanches determined that she was going to keep that option as a last resort: only to be used if she knew that David was in immediate danger.

What if he simply noticed me and this was his escape plan? She frowned. *Too many ifs…*

There were too many unknowns. With no weapon, no backup, no answers, and no time, Lourina reached for her phone again. She would try the number one last time before beginning pursuit, detailing to Mr. Kim what she was observing. She wanted to establish a chain of events and evidence. The new vehicle, its license plate, and so on. She had to pass along what she knew, just in case—

PI Sanches froze. It happened again. Her subconscious mind finally connected the dots: there was someone behind her. She had only noticed them approaching her car from her rear-view mirror. And it was too late. The person was already next to her passenger window. They moved like a shadow, stalking her.

Even if Lourina had a gun there would not be enough time. After all, Lourina had been distracted while watching David and reaching for her phone. She'd allowed them to sneak up on her. *Damnit*.

The person was now at her passenger window and facing into it. Lourina's experience in the field told her that setting her car into drive would take longer than for the mysterious person to draw and fire a gun. Time felt like it was slowing down. Her body moved in slow motion, her mind uncomfortably aware of what was happening.

Like out of a nightmare, she was unable to escape. Options were… useless.

The person then knocked on her window.

Lourina froze for a few heartbeats, wondering if she was dead—or if they wanted to see her face filled with terror before they killed her. Keeping the rest of her body frozen, she had no choice but to face her pursuer. She desperately hoped it was a misunderstanding, maybe they would let her go, alone and unharmed, as some sort of professional courtesy?

But the person—a woman in her forties with short blonde hair, Lourina realized—just stood there and stared at the PI in silence. The woman was clearly someone not to be messed with, however, she was not brandishing any weapons. Her face was neutral, cold, and calculating.

Their eyes locked for a moment and Lourina willed her hand to slowly and clearly move towards her window controls. Pressing down on the button, the passenger window lowered. Their eyes remained fixed on each other while the glass moved down, their barrier disappearing.

The woman appeared like a hunter staring into the eyes of a trapped beast, deliberating whether to release their prey back into the wild or whether to kill it. *What are you thinking?*

When the window had finally lowered, nothing was said between the two. Silence fell in the open air. The woman outside the car slowly reached up and pulled an object out from her jacket: a plain letter, white and folded down the middle. She then handed the letter to Lourina through the window. Lourina held her gaze for a moment before using her other hand to accept the letter.

The mysterious woman finally broke the silence.

“Contract fulfilled,” she informed Lourina in a neutral voice. “We will be contacting you again shortly.” The woman then turned around and walked away from Lourina, not looking back.

PI Sanches remained frozen in place, trying to work out what the fuck had just happened. Her hands were still on the window controls and holding the letter, respectively. But now they were slightly shaking. In her peripheral vision, Lourina saw David’s new SUV slowly driving off into the distance.

And from above her, Lourina noticed in the trailing sunlight what looked like a small shadow overhead… a drone, lazily flying high above her, almost impossible to see without being stationary and knowing where exactly to look. *Is that how they tracked him? And… me?*

Lourina's phone rang — it was Alan Kim's number.

CHAPTER 6 — SANTIAGO

A SINGLE SNOWFLAKE TRIED TO SURVIVE its atmospheric free-fall into the warm autumn air. Floating down aimlessly, the lone crystal was the last of its batch to remain. From the heavens to the earth, just one snowflake survived in the region.

The crystallized ice, now melting, continued diving towards the ground in a desperate bid to escape from its fate. Fortunately for the snowflake, the earth decided to help: a behemoth hand, a midnight-black skyscraper towering over the city of Seattle, Washington, reached out from the ground and captured the worthy ice—its journey over, its mission accomplished.

From within this skyscraper, past the window now stained by a single drop of water, brooded a man—a man who felt anything but a man. A man who believed himself a god. A man who others treated as if he were a god, too. For by a single unspoken word, this man could end their very lives.

Because he owned their world.

Christopher Tyler Santiago-Rodriguez, dressed in a fine black suit that had been sharply tailored, relaxed in his chair and stared north out the window towards the city beyond. He wore a pearl white dress shirt along with a golden tie and handkerchief combo to complement his emerald eyes. Dark strands of black hair framed his face while stubble outlined his jaw. Tyler stared out onto the playing board before him, enticed by the wonders as far as he could see. One day it would be his. The entire country. Officially. Finally.

All of it. His.

Until then, Tyler had to play nice. He pretended to care about the others, promoting whatever goal was necessary to ensure his place within this insane society. Veterans, climate change, and all the on-topic buzz words were common to the man.

Tyler initially portrayed himself as a typical native of Puerto Rico who now chased the

American Dream across the rest of the country. Always smiling, always helpful and ready to champion a good cause, the man used this cover to make another play behind the scenes. Whatever was necessary to win the game of life was fair.

He didn't mean it; he didn't care about it, but people still loved him as long as he donated a few million—sometimes a few billion—to some random cause. People saw him as a great provider. Yet, in the background, Tyler had already made back his investment through the compounding interest of his stock holdings.

The game was on.

And society loved him for it, as Tyler Santiago knew how to work a crowd. From his own backstory, born in the United States within the territory of Puerto Rico, Tyler later moved to Seattle following the devastating effects of Hurricane James in 1999.

What had initially been projected to be a routine tropical storm—a hurricane scale 0—had instead rapidly intensified into a tropical cyclone over multiple days and changed its approach toward the island. His family didn't have time to evacuate.

Hurricane James hit Puerto Rico dead-on as a category 5 storm on October 1999—the highest on the scale. The destruction was so unexpected, so powerful, that no level of government had time to react. Tens of thousands of American citizens died during the resulting response and recovery operations, either from the storm surge, debris, or from a lack of supplies and help.

Tyler had been the only survivor of his immediate family, the trauma incalculable. After a few weeks, his extended family members living in Seattle were able to find him. But two years later, while still recovering, Tyler's new world was shaken by September 11, 2001.

9/11 shook what little faith and security Tyler had left of the world. Seeing how the rest of the country changed overnight taught Tyler the same type of governance existed everywhere.

From then on, Tyler realized that the only person he could count on to change things was himself. And therefore, he would make sure that only he was in control from now on.

He knew how to fix things. He established connections, made secret deals and promises, and slowly rose through society with every loan, grant, or donation he could access.

Every industry taken over, every business consumed, was another player removed from the game. And Tyler wanted it all so he could control the game. He planned to make big changes. He wanted to make things better, more efficient, and more profitable. Whatever the cost, he was going to win.

Because he would always earn more than he lost. For Tyler Santiago had a golden touch, a man who knew how to survive against all the odds. And in this economic game of insanity we call life, Tyler decided that all economies had become fair game. Whatever he needed to do, Tyler Santiago would have it done. And others would physically do it for him, just for a literal rounding error on an accounting spreadsheet. Now that was power.

Tyler still deeply loved his home of Puerto Rico, La Isla del Encanto, his pride and joy. He had spent billions of his own money revamping the emergency systems across the island so that no more families had to undergo the trauma he did. But the man refused to take the final step and fight to change the laws that hindered it—because the game that dominated his life demanded it. He also stayed away from it physically, as it was still too soon for him to return.

He needed more time, more control, before he could finally make the decisions he wanted. He had to sneak past countless other billionaires and their respective companies, playing their games and not rocking the boat. He ignored their bigotry, racism, and elitism. He would smile, laugh, wink at them—all while his people were getting ready to slit their throats behind closed doors. He needed to be patient and calculating while still being a passenger on this boat.

Until it was time for him to take command.

Sitting in his chair, staring into the void of the night, Tyler sipped on his fancy rum. He relished the sensation of the warmth going down his throat, his ability to gain control of the poison through enough exposure. Even while intoxicated, Tyler was in command.

No one knew how much he'd sacrificed for his family. No one understood what he gave up for his island and his people. His family, his name, his entire identity was changed to fit the game. He even knew the path he walked lead to damnation, yet he still walked it.

As far as humanity was concerned, Tyler Santiago was a god among men. His control grew ever deeper, his influence spread ever wider. From the Pacific Northwest to the Caribbean; the islands of San Juan in Washington State to the streets of San Juan in Rich Port.

Professional suits, clean streets, and the entire "free" country.

A kingdom for one man—Tyler Santiago.

And behold, it was very good.

CHAPTER 7 — DEVINE

THEODORE STARED THROUGH HIS CAMO BINOCULARS and mentally recorded the details of his target. He couldn't risk taking notes from this position, neither physical nor electronic, as he needed to cover his tracks. He needed to think. He needed time.

The complex in front of him was massive: a billionaire's playpen overlooking Lake Chelan, just a few hours north of his home in Richland, Washington. Theodore had decided to stay at home for a few days after driving back before taking his time to research his new target. A few trips to local libraries here, and some innocent searches on his computer there, and he had a few drafts to play with.

He had also taken the time to sell Woodard's vehicle before finding another—this time an older, and well-traveled, dark blue SUV—to complement his new identity as a solo hiker. Once satisfied with his decision, and all his material was prepared, Theodore drove across the Yakima River Delta and merged onto the Washington interstate. His three-hour drive to Chelan County had begun and he was unusually excited.

Camped out on a hill overlooking the complex, Theodore found himself alone and finally free. Normally this late into the fall would be near freezing and unpleasant at the mercy of the elements. But with climate change, areas like Lake Chelan had started to become warm year-round. And for the corporate assassin, his body felt as though it could ignite the nearby shrubbery. His mind raced, his heart beat quickly, and the open air of the woods kept him awake.

No rules, he mused to himself. *No contract stipulations, no proof of death, no having to team up, nothing.*

Since getting burned, Theodore was now a free agent. He could go wherever he pleased, do whatever he wanted. And Theodore decided that he should also embrace a new employer: himself.

No more contracts from others, he'd make the decisions from now on.

He was in control.

Staring at the—complex, compound, or whatever people called those new billionaire "homes" these days—before him, Theodore remained a silent stalker for nearly a week. Large, expansive, and beautiful, the multi-story home sat atop a hill with clear views of the lake below it.

Actually, given the scale of the compound, and factoring in the helicopter landing pad, it might be more accurate to say the *mansion* sat atop the hill. What was strange to Theodore, though, was that he couldn't quite tell whether the billionaire's home was actually private property, state, or even federal? *Might simply be unincorporated.*

Hmph, the man thought to himself. *Now, wouldn't that be interesting?*

In his past life, Theodore had developed the ability to conduct stakeouts: sitting for hours at a time without moving, able to sleep in the most uncomfortable of places. Fully dressed in hunting camouflage and exposed to the elements, Theodore embraced the disturbing act he performed. He enjoyed being an unwanted observer of billionaire Jade Devine. He was a voyeur, seemingly a perverted hermit. But for Theodore, his pleasure was a burning desire that demanded an audience—and a victim.

He would create both.

…

An entire week had passed and Theodore continued to mentally record notes for himself while hiding amongst the hills.

He would occasionally leave his post and return to his vehicle, recovering any new supplies or

merely dropping off what he had used. *Leave no trace,* he reminded himself while smiling at his memories of his former years in the Scouts. Those camping lessons were not only full of excellent advice for campers, but also usable for woodland assassins! If you did it properly, that is.

Theodore also made sure to have no weapons on him. Well, other than the bear spray, knife, and a flare gun in case of emergency. This way no visitors—park rangers, wandering hikers, or other unexpected guests—could deduct what he was doing. For all intents and purposes, Mr. Hudson was a middle-aged camper. Those tools seemingly normal for him, right?

Besides, he thought while playing around with his flare gun. *This plan will require some… creativity.*

…

Mrs. Jade Devine, former CEO and current majority shareholder of Devine Investment Group, loved the view from her winter home.

While she spent the majority of her year at her primary residence in Florida, she desperately longed for the winter months so that she could escape from all those horrible board meetings about "mining investments" and "resource extraction." She had more than enough staff to handle those issues for her. As far as she was concerned, the only thing she wanted to see on those quarterly reports was that line going up. The "how" and the "what" and the "why" bored her: just make the line go up. Her time was valuable and each minute of those damned meetings ate into her life. *How rude of them.*

Tonight was cooler than usual from Jade's perspective. A Sunday, with a modest 59 degrees Fahrenheit (or 15 degrees Celsius, as she had translated for her international friends while venting on social media), and there were countless stars in the clear sky. There was no one else around for

as far as the eye could see, no homes or other buildings. Her porcelain skin glowed in the waning light, her mahogany hair flying freely in the breeze.

This was her domain.

To Jade, the cold air was amazing. The only thing that could have made the night even better would have been a fresh layer of snow… but she knew it was far too warm for that. Standing on her balcony, not far from her helipad, staring off into the night, Jade thought to herself in quiet contemplation. Her staff had already left for the night and her husband, Mike, was still away on business.

Swirling the wine in her glass, Jade stared at the swashing red liquid within the elegant crystal. She always drank the night before flying, because she really disliked helicopters. No, she *hated* helicopters. But the alcohol would keep her mind numbed, allowing her to sleep the night before without much fear. Plus, she had also taken some expensive pills an hour earlier—just don't tell her physician, he does nothing but complain to her about her charts.

Looking down her balcony, Jade developed a frown. "Are you thirsty?" she called out to the dried golden-brown plants below her. *They look thirsty.* But none of the plants responded. *Hmm…*

Mrs. Devine tried to recall the last time they had a gardener to take care of all their plants and shrubs around the winter house. Their last one tried to increase his rates after a few years of working together—"difficult economy," the fraud had claimed—and she happily fired his ass. Jade wouldn't tolerate someone trying to scam her. But right now the plants below her looked dry and thirsty. And the wine inside her glass looked ever so refreshing.

Do roses like rosé? she asked herself with a giggle. She then poured what was left of her wine over the balcony to "help" the vines, giving them alcohol in lieu of water. She'd have to remember to find a new gardener sometime—but for now, she was beginning to feel sleepy. Everything was

going according to schedule. *Just like these pills.*

…

Theodore watched Jade pour her wine over the railing before stumbling back into her mansion. He also watched as the lights across the complex slowly winked off one-by-one as his prey headed towards her nest.

Once the final light was off—except for what appeared to be flickers from a television set left on in the master bedroom—Theodore packed up the last of his equipment and covered his tracks while heading towards his vehicle. It was dark now, and he was in no rush, so he took his time making sure everything looked good. Not perfect, but good enough.

Retracing his steps and using tree branches to wipe away his trail, Theodore arrived back at his SUV. Tonight was the night, the night when he would complete his first contract for himself. But why did it feel so *weird* to him? He shrugged, pushing these uncertain thoughts away. He needed to prepare himself for the next phase of his plan: it was a tight schedule and he needed to stay awake.

Theodore had thought about this night all week. He hoped everything would work. *Complexity invites failure.* He'd remembered the saying from his training days all those years ago. But tonight Theodore wanted to try something new. He wanted to handle the situation in a slightly different, somewhat personal manner.

Going after a billionaire was far beyond his comfort zone. Even back when he had worked corporate gigs, Theodore always tried to maintain a low-profile. Mid-ranking executives at regional offices were his usual targets, for example. But a billionaire? Too many risks, too much

security. No one sane would go after such a hard target. Let alone expect to survive.

Fuck it, Theodore thought to himself, resigned to his decision.

…

Sherman cruised southeast and towards the water, flying in a formation of one.

The single unmanned commercial drone was difficult to use in such mountainous terrain, as its signal was being pushed to its limit; however, Theodore had planned for this issue ahead of time by planting relays and repeaters along the route in strategic locations.

He allowed himself to expand the drone's area of operations to ensure that he could execute everything according to his timeline. He'd also made scribbled but disjointed notes of where each placement was so he could quickly retrieve them once he needed to flee. Those notes were scheduled to be burned tonight.

Federal regulations had heavily restricted drone usage over the years, along with the ability for individuals to acquire them these days. But Theodore embraced this knowledge and used it as a double-edged sword. In this mountainous environment, nearby radars could not spot the low-flying drone: their coverage unable to pierce through entire kilometers of rock and stone. And as for acquiring the drone, Theodore had enough connections to pull.

For Theodore—now known as "Karl"—he knew that tonight would be *the* night. The night that he would always remember. And while he did not expect anyone to find him in the remote wilderness, he knew that he needed multiple backup plans—just in case someone did. And for that, Theodore had assumed the identity of Karl, although he did not have any paperwork to prove it. If a cop pulled him over, Theodore would claim to have forgotten his wallet and accept the

consequences, giving the cop Karl's bogus information.

Driving down the twisting roads of the lake, Theodore experienced excitement burrowing deep within himself—all the way down to his bones. The emotion was intoxicating. But he needed to remain calm and collected on this mission; otherwise, he wasn't going home. And now staring at the drone's display, Theodore was fully committed.

Sherman had passed another checkpoint, still on track for its target: the estate of Jade Devine. Enough time had passed to ensure that she was fully asleep. And because she had no neighbors nearby, the odds of someone noticing a dark gray drone flying low at night were minimal. The only risk to Theodore would be a lost driver roaming the woods at night, far from any other home.

…

Jade is a deep sleeper.

Yet tonight she found herself waking up unexpectedly. Glancing up at her security monitors next to her bed, everything appeared normal inside and outside of the complex. Her head felt like it was going to burst, though. *Ugh, at least I can fix that.*

She painfully and slowly sat up, rubbing her face and cursing the word "alcohol." Jade was still tired but now she was nauseous. Slowly and carefully getting up from her bed, the billionaire struggled to reach her grand master bathroom—a beautiful room with an exquisite obsidian black tub in the middle. Pre-set lavender candles were laid about the room, unlit, along with multiple technical accessories that were installed throughout the suite.

Upon entering the bathroom, Jade could feel the urge to throw up building. Fortunately, she quickly reached the toilet—and just in time. After flushing the unrecognizable contents down the

drain, Jade softly laid her head on the wall next to her for a moment, her eyes staring at the inviting bathtub across the room.

Gathering her strength, she slowly tugged at her clothing and started to run herself a bath. She allowed her head to rest against the cold tub while it slowly warmed from the water pouring in. She also added in some lavender soap and created an aromatic bubble bath.

Jade knew that stepping into a tub in her mental and physical state was risky, so she decided to cut off the water early and leave it at a lower-than-normal level. Climbing into the tub slowly, the warmth on her legs began to feel like heaven.

Heat, she told herself after craving the cold just moments ago, *so warm and embracing.* Looking over to her side, a panel displayed a selection of controls for the room's lighting and to activate the media player next to her.

While Jade was too hung over to watch the television—recognizing that her headache was partially due to leaving her television on in the master bedroom earlier—she instead selected soft music, specifically jazz. While she would have preferred silence, Jade wanted to drown out the sound of the bedroom's television instead.

Raising the volume of the speakers, smooth music flooded the room. Jade, in return, was at peace. She let her head rest against her bath's cushion while her left hand reached over to dim the lights. Closing her eyes, Jade enjoyed the warmth that surrounded her, the music that comforted her, and the soft glow of the candles that illuminated the night.

She didn't remember lighting the candles, but the atmosphere matched the mood… and she wondered what else she had forgotten. *Oh yes,* she remembered with a groan. *Tomorrow I will take the helicopter.* She tried to force her mind to focus on the music instead, distracting herself. Anything but flying.

…

Outside the compound, Sherman flew silently and slowly. Avoiding the views of the security cameras, the drone flew over the hill yet below the mansion. Sherman struggled to keep its trajectory steady—its weight was constantly shifting, compensating for the liquid that was sloshing around inside the cargo hold below it.

Wildland firefighting tactics embraced the philosophy of "fighting fire with fire." By creating a fire ahead of a wildfire, firefighters were able to "burn a line" and deprive the oncoming flames of the fuel needed to sustain itself. After all, to create a fire all three parts of the "fire triangle" are needed: oxygen, fuel, and heat.

And Sherman was the heat.

To expedite the burn—and to increase the safety of those on the ground—firefighters later adopted "drip cans" that slowly released flammable liquid under helicopters, creating steady streams of flame in a controlled manner. And with recent technological advancements in autonomous flight, drip cans were later modified to fit on unmanned commercial drones to free up helicopters for other tasks. Now, every wildland fire station had a "drip drone."

Sherman, though, was not a wildland firefighting drone. But Sherman did have a modified drip can hanging under it. And thus Sherman obeyed the commands of Theodore without question, like the good little soldier it was.

Slowly a line of fire was etched into the dry brush below the mansion, the thirst of the dehydrated plants being replaced by the hunger of the fire that consumed them. The fire began spreading around the complex, its heat rising and radiating flames to the brush above it… and

towards the mansion at the top of the hill.

With its mission now complete, the drone disengaged and headed towards the last relay across the lake. Theodore, satisfied, began to pack up his gear. Now he just needed to drive home and collect his equipment along the way. Unfortunately for "Karl," he would be unable to stay behind to watch the fireworks—but he would check the news in a few days to discover what he missed.

…

Jade enjoyed how her music drowned out the annoying sounds from her home: the loud and stupid television in her bedroom, the annoying beeps she could hear from across the complex, and the occasional animal outside that fought in the night. Her head still swirled with pain from the alcohol, so the idea of getting out of the tub disgusted her. She craved the safety and comfort of the tub.

A minute later and those annoying beeps grew louder. Frustrated, the majority stakeholder of DIG looked around in annoyance to find the disturbance. She wanted to punish someone, something, for this transgression. But the only thing she could notice was how the candle lights outside were brighter than usual tonight.

Wait, outside? Jade questioned herself. Her eyes darted to the unlit candles inside her room. She hadn't lit any candles in days. Realization began to set in and Jade experienced sobriety hitting her like a sucker punch to the gut. Those beeps weren't just annoying sounds; those were smoke alarms!

She needed to move, to escape. *Now!*

Panicking, Jade scrambled from the tub. But while escaping the warm and soapy waters, she

slipped on the marble floor and fell. A horrible feeling of pain shot through her left leg as she fell hard on her side.

Unable to stand, Jade's mind raced for options. Her safe room was rated to withstand a home fire, as it was designed for billionaires to survive a wildfire burn over—but the safe room was located on the other side of her master bedroom. And the closest fire department was miles away.

The fire outside, however, was not.

Trying to stand up, Jade slipped again. The agony was unbearable. Could she have broken something? She couldn't tell.

Adrenaline surged through her body and told her to crawl. Her grand master design, once the pride and joy of her winter home, now seemed unfairly long and cruelly designed. How far would she have to crawl? All she had to do was reach the room. Once inside, she would just need to hit the button, and…

Smoke began to fill the room.

And Jade felt uncomfortably warm.

CHAPTER 8 — BRAD

"CAN YOU BELIEVE THIS?" Mr. Kim shouted to no one in particular, the man staring down at the newspaper grasped firmly in his hands.

Physical newspapers were rare these days as most consumers preferred either digital copies or larger volume work, such as journal publications, so having a newspaper delivered every morning was another indicator of Alan Kim's wealth. It also indicated that he had too much free time on his hands despite being a busy executive.

The cover story on the paper highlighted the latest shocking news from across the globe. Dead-center, in large print, was the latest tragedy from yesterday, ready for the public's consumption:

JADE DEVINE DEAD AT 52

Vacation home engulfed by flame — Police suspect foul play

Standing across the room from the executive stood Lourina Sanches, privately fuming, her eyes like an angry wolf. Had the two of them met up yesterday, Lourina might have murdered the executive in a fit of rage. Fortunately, the only thing the private investigator killed last night was that unopened bottle of California wine she had stored away in her office in case of emergency.

Their phone call from yesterday had been fairly short. Mr. Kim informed Lourina that she "had performed wonderfully" and that he would like to talk with her again the next time she "decided to stop by." Lourina, feeling incentivized, decided to make that visit happen sooner than later. She wanted to know what the hell happened yesterday—and why.

The reward money had already cleared her bank account by the morning as promised—somehow appearing the next day, despite the staggering amount—which cooled the flames of her

anger overnight.

Lourina wanted to head straight back to Mr. Kim, but her fatigue from driving so long prevented her from accomplishing her desire. Today she thanked her past self for being so wise. The only embarrassing moment she could remember from last night was the drunken stupor that followed, whereby she had given an overly emotional apology to her pet fish Anthony. Of course, Lourina didn't have a fish named Anthony (she meant Alex), but she knew that Alex would understand.

"There are many things I cannot believe, Mr. Kim," the investigator said with ice in her words. *Fuck him*, she thought. *The money has already cleared. I don't need this shit. The job's done.*

"Detective Sanches," the man's eyes slowly rose off the newspaper, decrying the horrendous death of the "beloved" billionaire. "We can dispense with the pleasantries." They were alone in his office again and he was sipping his brown coffee while his eyes scanned hers.

Okay, I'm game, she decided. "So what—THE FUCK—happened yesterday?"

Alan Kim laughed, finding Lourina's outburst entertaining. Though if the man knew what thoughts were currently pulsing through her mind right now, he may not have laughed so easily. A few moments passed in silence before Mr. Kim sighed and shook his head.

"I always know where my son is, detective."

Lourina said nothing in return, staring at him with an expression that urged him to continue. Her nostrils flared while she performed controlled breathing techniques; meanwhile, her mouth was clamped tightly shut to ensure her thoughts remained internal.

"You see," the executive clarified, "David is terrible at hiding." He shrugged. "In fact, David used the same damn fake name as he did last time." Kim laughed again, this time sheepishly raising both arms up in a "who knows" gesture. "I mean, really."

"So why did you hire me?" Lourina interjected. She desperately wanted to know. Enough of

this bullshit, this foreplay. This whole situation bothered her. While the amount she had earned from the contract was substantial, she knew it was merely pocket change to the executive. Still, Lourina could not fathom as to why this whole ordeal had involved her in the first place.

Santiago's Chief Operating Officer laid back in his chair, allowing himself to feel relaxed and comfortable. He looked as though he was about to speak to an old friend while they sat next to a campfire.

After a moment of silence, his voice was soft. "It was a joke," he admitted.

The room was noticeably colder for both parties. Kim, observing this, made the wise decision to follow-up. "Not at your expense," the man attempted to placate the darkness he saw forming on Lourina's face. "But at David's."

Mr. Kim stood up, stretching for a moment. He tossed the paper casually onto his desk, placing his fellow billionaire's face unceremoniously down on his desk calendar.

"Please," Lourina controlled her breathing. "Go on."

Before Kim continued his explanation, he decided to stand up and walk across the room—just like he had done the first time they had met a week ago—before heading towards his liquor cabinet. "Originally I planned to ignore David."

"Ignore?"

"He is very dramatic."

And where did he get that from, *I wonder?* Lourina was being pushed to her limits. *And seriously, from coffee to liquor? Already?*

Kim popped off the top and poured a glass of the dark liquid, the same label on the bottle as their first meeting. This bottle, however, was starting off at a higher level than she remembered, suggesting that the man had finished that last bottle in between their visits. He turned to her, his

eyes silently questioning the investigator.

A face of judgment was her only response.

Accepting her silence, Alan Kim took the glass of alcohol and downed the shot for himself. To Lourina, the liquid in his glass reminded her of poison. Her mind was fuzzy, unsure of what she was expecting to learn from this conversation. *Also, it's way too early.*

"And where do I enter this equation?" she demanded to know.

"Detective Sanches," Mr. Kim poured himself another shot. "Are you familiar with the insult whereby you tip someone a penny?" He looked up at her. "You know, the literal lowest amount of money possible?" Swirling the glass, the executive stared into the liquid. "In this case, I was tipping my son the equivalent of a penny for his poor performance and melodramatics. Had I instead ignored him, it would only have empowered his belligerence and rebellion."

"But by hiring a single unarmed detective," the man continued, "and by leaving my normal team at home, it showed David that I do not care—and can still find him."

"Hold on," Lourina interjected. "But you *always knew* where David was, so why bother with hiring me for your little family shit-show?" She had reached the end of her patience with these games.

Alan stared at her blankly as if he was genuinely confused by her response. "Because David doesn't *know* I can always find him. In this analogy, it would be like hiring a professional courier to deliver someone a single penny. To amplify the insult. To show I could have done more for David."

Mr. Kim tilted his head to his side. "It was never supposed to be an insult to the courier. I'm being sincere."

Letting her eyes drop from the stare she had been holding since first entering the room, Lourina

released the tension in her muscles and thought about the conversation. Kim's voice and explanation seemed real—a sad truth to discover about a family. Her words felt numb as they exited her mouth. "A cheap courier, though." *What did I get involved with?*

"Admittedly, that was the original plan, yes." Standing up straight, the executive now displayed an aura of subtle royalty. "But in your case, detective," he continued. "I found something else. Something even better." He locked eyes with her again. "You."

"Me?" Lourina was legitimately dumbstruck. *What?*

"We never expected you to actually find David. I was planning on showing him your contract as proof that I 'had tried' to find him."

"So you never intended to pay me?" Lourina's words were sharper than she intended.

Alan Kim looked horrified at the accusation, again puzzled by his guest's behavior. "Goodness, no!" he shook his head. "A deal is a deal, Ms. Sanches. We had the money ready to send over… we just never thought someone, with so little resources, could actually find David."

Lourina did not respond again, this time because of a lack of words. Her mind was in free fall and trying to figure out what to say or do next.

"Instead, I placed my team and their resources on you." Kim finished.

"You *what?*" Lourina's mind recoiled in realization, recalling the moments she experienced paranoia yesterday. She later realized she had been followed, of course, but she assumed she had been followed due to being in the wrong place at the wrong time… not because she was the target! *Just who are you, Alan?*

"Yes," Kim admitted. "After you left, I was impressed by your deductive skills. We were then alerted through our network that you had been sniffing around for David—and even found him. We were not sure at first if you would connect the dots, but you did." He tipped his glass to her in

a mock salute. “Well done with being early to anticipate the *Coho’s* arrival, by the way. I had to talk with customs to let David sneak by—his identity choices are terrible, but why let him know that we know?”

“It’s a beautiful ship,” Lourina admitted. “I have taken it a few times myself. If Keith… sorry, if David—” She stared at the man for a moment with a face of bemusement, only to see the executive now cracking a smile to himself at the mention of the fake name. “—had not shown up, I was going to take a day or two in Victoria for myself. Clear my head, think up a new plan.”

“Well, my team was quite impressed.” Another glass was retrieved, a third pour from the bottle. Kim walked over to Lourina with both glasses in hand. “So much so,” he continued while smiling at her, “that I want you as part of my team.”

A glass of poison was handed to the private investigator, the intoxicant beginning to appear alluring to her. The executive knew how to play her. While she was dealing with the effects of her hangover from last night, her body absentmindedly accepted the alcohol presented to her. “For more insult deliveries?” she asked.

Alan Kim shook his head. “No, you were chosen for that task at random. But it was a fortunate choice, wouldn’t you say?”

“And the drone?” Lourina still couldn’t believe that part.

Kim grinned devilishly. “Made in the U.S.A.” He winked at her. “Santiago has special privileges with the FAA, DoD, DHS, you name it. We wanted to observe you from a distance, see how you operated alone while trailing David. We only used it for that part.”

Lourina looked down at the glass cradled within her hands, drifting into deep concentration. *Too many new details. So much to consider.* She somehow felt insulted, proud, and overwhelmed.

Networking, she reminded herself. *Play the game. Hide your emotions*. “Okay,” Lourina

accepted Alan Kim's offer, taking a single sip of the liquor before it was noon. "Let's discuss the details."

...

Back in her office, Lourina reviewed the contract again for the fourth time. Her legs were twitchy, her mind strangely in a state of flux: drifting, contemplating, and archiving the day.

The details were intense. Absurd dress codes, protocols, and all other types of silly nuances that accompanied being a puppet for a rich megalomaniac. However, the benefits were *fantastic,* and the pay was *exceptional*. At least Lourina knew that Santiago was good for paying his dues. And now she had an entire year of rent paid for, allowing Lourina to do whatever she wanted. She could breathe.

Alan Kim had gifted Lourina the remainder of the bottle they'd shared. Lourina sat in her chair and swirled a glass of the liquor, feeling unexpectedly fancy in her office. A gift to soothe her rage.

Pops of bubbles could be overheard from her four nearby companions, swimming around aimlessly and lost in the enjoyment of their aquatic home. Lourina had placed a sticky note on the tank yesterday reminding her to learn the names of each fish. She had even placed a few of those reference materials that Oliver's mother had gifted her, leaving them out on the nearby table. She'd learn, eventually. Lourina promised herself she would.

She also apologized to Alex for calling him Anthony. Alex, however, did not seem to care. Lourina felt conflicted about that.

"You know, this almost reminds me of a regulation book," the investigator grumbled to herself aloud while reviewing the details. She was still mulling over the oddities of her new contract and admiring how so much could be implied by so little.

Technically, the contract was *not* for employment with Santiago's Chief Operating Officer or

his department, nor was it for her to work on his pre-established security team. Instead, Lourina would report directly to Alan Kim as a contractor. No chain of command, no more bullshit: just action and payment. *And a strange boss.*

After her initial and unpleasant introduction with his team back in Ocean Shores, Lourina was satisfied with this contract's design. PI Sanches was therefore contracted by Mr. Kim's shell company on an as-needed basis. She would need to contact her accountant sometime and clarify whether this changed anything regarding her taxes. But as for the present, Lourina was given her next job:

Her assignment? *Undercover sabotage.*

Her target? *The Estate of the late Mrs. Jade Devine.*

Her objective? "*To cause as much damage as possible."*

Lourina recalled her thoughts from the conversation with Alan Kim earlier, trying to etch the memory into stone and have it become permanent. She allowed her mind to visually and auditorily play back her conversation, refreshing the details of the strange assignment:

Lourina maintained a neutral face. Professional. From within her mind, thoughts began to race—she knew that the fire of this moment was still hot and the details of her contract were still malleable. This gave her the perfect opportunity to ensure her new job would allow her to sleep at night. She struck. "Damage in what way, sir?"

"Any way you can," was the curt reply.

"What is your preferred end result?" She hoped her question would catch the answer she had

been fishing for as Lourina wanted to avoid asking "why" directly, skirting the lines between "harmless curiosity" and "need-to-know."

"Make them turn on each other," Mr. Kim ordered. He either realized what she was asking for and obliged her, or had simply taken the bait. "Jade has been a pain in my ass for too many years. Her and her damned 'DIG' crap."

Lourina had a few drinks in her by this point. While she had stopped accepting refills earlier—to sober up for her drive back to her office—she noticed that her ability to think was more impaired than she preferred. But so was Kim's. The poison from the fancy liquor, some obscure brand that had no public marketing along with a cryptic website, was now turning its two victims into equals. Drinking buddies. Comrades. Letting the truth flow between them.

"Any friends of ours that I should be aware of?" Lourina inquired. "Or concerned about?"

Mr. Kim looked at her quizzically, prompting her to clarify her question.

"That is," Lourina explained. "Will there be anyone I should avoid targeting?"

"Just me."

This time it was Lourina's turn to look puzzled. Kim smiled at her genuine expression.

"We will be going together."

The details made sense to Lourina in a semi-twisted way. Kim had planned out the travel so that the two of them would visit Jade Devine's complex under the facade of being a sympathetic fellow billionaire showing his respect to the dead.

But in reality the Santiago man was a shark who smelled blood in these waters. He was not

fishing for money: he knew his name would not be found in any Last Will and Testament of Jade Devine. Instead, Kim saw an opportunity to destroy his competitor from within. A way to piss on the grave of his enemy, or so he claimed.

Lourina re-read the non-disclosure agreement part of her contract. To the investigator an NDA seemed like a joke. *I am signing an NDA to help a billionaire investigate people—who are under their own billionaire's NDA—to provide my billionaire with more information over their billionaire.* Her thoughts amused herself. *Ain't that some shit?*

There was no date established for when this event was to occur; instead, Kim had ordered Lourina to be ready to go by tomorrow morning. This objective worked for her, as it allowed her time to slowly work on the bottle that had been gifted to her.

Another reason why Lourina did not join Kim's surveillance detail is because Lourina was still unknown to the world of the elite and therefore perfect for this job. Alan Kim would bring Lourina with him as his "plus one," hopeful that anyone who noticed her would simply assume the duo was a temporary affair—Lourina pretending to be an escort for the billionaire. The elite would ignore her presence in return.

Lourina had been known back at the academy for her beauty, but her looks had caused unwanted attention, much to her frustration. Either they lusted after her or they were jealous of her.

But to Lourina, she was normal. In fact, she had an endless list of things she wanted to change about herself. At the police academy all Lourina cared about was graduating. She merely considered keeping up with her health to be critical for her job, maintaining her looks for advantage in social situations.

"Even an instructor," Sanches mumbled to herself in disgust. To this day there were a few names she would never contact again, their inappropriate remarks and behavior burning a firebreak

between any future friendships.

There were only four instructors left from the academy that Lourina idolized, and only one kept in contact. The other three had faded away over the years. Her department, too, had slowly distanced themselves from her—although she knew that last part was because of her own departure. She just wanted to secure her career.

And now her good looks were to be used for undercover work once again. She disliked these types of assignments—often feeling gross afterwards—but she felt better after secretly experimenting earlier when becoming drinking buddies with Kim, testing the waters and seeing how the man behaved when alone and intoxicated.

So far? The man was straightforward and only cared about his end-goals: it was his methods for achieving those goals that were intricate and obscure. In this specific case, Lourina was confident that the executive was more interested in desecrating Jade's legacy than in degrading Lourina's autonomy.

But what the hell do I wear to such an event? While she had clothes for fancier occasions, Lourina had no idea what an escort's outfit would look like in the billionaire community. *Probably by wearing fewer pieces of clothing than I'd prefer.* Thankfully, Lourina knew that dressing in a bikini would be inappropriate for this specific outing: she had another outfit in mind.

Next to her desk, Brad suddenly nipped at Alex and caused the other fish to dart away during the excitement. Some time passed before the quad of fish returned to their leisurely pace and embraced the quiet. Lourina watched with confusion: her eyes drifting between the fish, her sticky note on the tank, and bubbles flowing from the cleaning device.

Hopeful that a change of perspective would help her solve this puzzle, Lourina decided to stand up and go explore her storage closet filled with random clothes. Most were for work—some in a

utilitarian style or for undercover operations as a member of the public. But a few pieces had merit.

Half an hour later, and an outfit was assembled. It wasn't great, but it would have to do. Lourina even looked up images online of recent scandals in the billionaire world to get a rough idea of how their escorts would be dressed in public.

Maybe I could pass this outfit off as my attempt at being "respectful to the deceased?"

Lourina laughed at herself, finding enjoyment at the absurdity of the moment. She then wished Alex, Brad, Charles, and Danny "goodnight" before beginning the walk back to her apartment. She didn't want to drive again after so many drinks tonight. Besides, it was only a few minutes' walk. She'd say "hello" again to Mt. Tahoma off in the distance—the mountain that her city of Tacoma was named after—and maybe a few contacts along her way back.

...

The next morning was uneventful.

Lourina had monitored her phone in case any new messages arrived; however, none had. For the first time in her life, Lourina found herself aimlessly floating. There was nothing left on her to-do list outside of her regular chores. She was adrift.

She showered longer than usual and allowed herself to rack up a hefty heating bill after securing her new contract. Feeling refreshed, the private investigator enjoyed a hearty meal to repay the debt to her stomach from all the alcohol yesterday, and to wake herself up.

She even enjoyed putting on more makeup than usual and experimenting with her looks. *Not bad, actually.*

While walking to her office, Lourina found herself breathing in deeply to enjoy the fresh air. She was able to think clearly again and replayed the conversations from earlier within her mind while scanning the streets for threats. While Lourina was fairly safe in this area due to her

community arrangements, there was always a risk of random acts of violence.

Yet today it seemed as though the world favored Lourina, seemingly in agreement with her latest perspective on life: take it slow and enjoy the moment. You've earned it, my friend. Hell, even the mountain was out to greet her, while those who roamed streets gave her a wide berth.

And once back at her office, Lourina began her routine as usual: she disabled the alarm, turned on the lights, checked on the fish, verified everything was in place, importantly her pre-packed outfit from the night before. But when Lourina reviewed her personal messages from her long-distance friend, her phone suddenly rang.

This momentarily surprised Lourina, staring down at the device in her hand, as her phone was supposed to have been in silent mode. In fact, it was supposed to only ring for a specific contact: Alan Kim. *Oh, shit.* She answered.

"How soon can you be ready?" Kim's voice sounded distant on the phone.

Where are you? It sounds like… a public area? Lourina tried to listen in to determine what she was hearing from the other end. "Immediately, I just need to change into my outfit and then I'll be on the road," she said.

"That won't be necessary. Meet your driver outside."

Lourina said nothing in return, scrambling to her window as curiosity overtook her. Across the street a black luxury SUV—similar to the one that picked David up two days prior—was now parked outside along with a suited driver.

The driver looked visibly uncomfortable with his location in the city. Multiple people looked back in return.

"I'll still need to change," she reasserted.

"Bring your clothes with you," Kim ordered. Her phone started to sound like a jet engine taking

off next to her ear. It was becoming painful. “You will have time to change at the lounge.”

“What lounge?” she was resisting the urge to lower the phone’s volume in case she missed something her boss was saying.

“Santiago has a private lounge at SEATAC. Changing at the lounge will give our plane and helicopter crews the necessary time to prepare, anyway.”

Wait, Lourina’s interest was piqued. *Seattle Tacoma International Airport? Plane? Helicopter?! What the hell…*

“I’ll text you the rest of the details in a moment,” Kim continued.

“Understood,” Lourina confirmed. The executive hung up, leaving the PI alone with her thoughts. She was getting used to these new working conditions. Behind her an audience had formed: three of her fish were now staring at her. The fourth must have been hiding in the fake skull in the corner of the tank, or maybe somewhere in the plants.

“Sorry, fellas.” Lourina looked back at her compatriots with a sly grin. “You know if I could take you with me to see Lake Chelan, I would. You’d love it.”

Packed and ready to go, Lourina practically skipped while locking up her office. She was going to enjoy this trip. If all else fails, she could quit her contract and enjoy a year of doing whatever the hell she wanted. To Lourina, the sky was the limit. Literally, if you considered the upcoming helicopter and plane rides.

She forced herself to keep her mental energy positive, despite the insulting and unpredictable new boss. *Hang in there, Lourina.*

While Lourina closed the door behind her, Brad stared at her from the shadows, silently watching from within the plastic skull of the fish tank as Lourina left her office to begin her new journey. His silvertips were lightly reflecting off the glass and distorted in the water.

The others left Brad alone. They did not school with him.

Brad then slowly drifted back into the shadows and disappeared from the tank.

CHAPTER 9 — JASMINE

"WHERE WILL WE BE LANDING?" Lourina had to speak louder than she preferred into her headset to overcome the sound of the helicopter.

Outside the window rested the charred remains of Jade Devine's complex: quite the grizzly sight from above. The residence was massive, nearly the size of Alan Kim's. Lourina also noticed the burn pattern and realized why the police had suspected foul play.

It's a straight line, she observed privately.

Clean and precise, as if a surgeon had made a routine incision into the earth. As though someone had lit a candle and walked down a straight path and lit a uniform fire from within the brush. And with the heat rising, the flames had only one place to go: *up*.

And in this specific case, up the hill… and into Jade's home, cutting off all routes of escape.

Alan Kim sat across from Lourina in the helicopter in a designer suit in pitch black, as though he was in mourning. It reminded Lourina of the black folder she'd accepted from his courier—the damned folder that had started everything.

The interior of the helicopter was absurdly flashy and executive in design. Leather seats, carpeted floors, and a separate cockpit. Kim locked eyes momentarily with Lourina and extended his arm, pointing his finger at the window in response. Lourina followed his signal and felt her eyes widening in horror after recognizing where he was indicating.

"Remember," the man's voice crackled from within her headset. *"Damage."*

Santiago's golden helicopter—well, no doubt one of the many helicopters from their fleet—began its descent towards the complex. This decision caused alarm from those below as a sudden vortex of wind created by the helicopter began to throw around loose objects. Lourina cringed internally, sorry for any of the poor bastards assigned to investigate the case. Had the helicopter

been owned by anyone else, she was sure the landing party would have been swiftly arrested for disturbing an active crime scene.

But the golden paint on the helicopter was simultaneously a political shield and a public reminder of who was in charge: no officer who valued their job would say anything. Publicly at least. And any who dared would receive an immediate phone call from their superiors.

Yet from the family of Jade Devine, no such restraint would be offered. Especially for her widower, Michael, who Lourina had been briefed about during her flight. And now, as they descended, Lourina saw a lone man heading towards the helicopter. His face looked carved out of stone, taunting the crew that had the audacity to land on the helipad; a man, incidentally, matching the description of Michael Devine.

Oh, shit… his helipad!

Michael's eyes were red. Literally, as the helicopter had kicked up enough ash and debris to cause his eyes to water. But his eyes were also red from anger at their disturbance. Lourina gulped, hopeful the police below would keep the peace.

Lourina had flown out of SEATAC a few hours earlier, chartered on an executive aircraft before transferring to the helicopter at a private Santiago airport. While at the lounge Lourina had removed her outfit from of her small suitcase and dressed herself for the remainder of the ride.

Kim, meanwhile, had said little when he arrived, only complimenting her on her dress and commenting that Lourina "looked good." For Lourina, that was enough.

She wore a dark purple—almost grape—mini sweater dress: belted, oversized, off the shoulder, with a slit in her body con skirt to complement her knee-high black boots in matching the late fall weather and unpredictable environment. She thought this combination would work better than high heels or flashy colors while walking around a destroyed complex in the hills.

Lourina was unaware, however, that the plan was for them to land on the literal crime scene—she thought they'd land some place nearby and take a convoy over, maybe. But now with all the ashes flying around, Lourina pondered if taking a purple sweater dress had been a wise decision. *Will any of the ash get on the dress? Oh, no…*

She shook her head and let her mind wipe away these thoughts. She was now making enough money to afford multiple wardrobes, so she forced herself to review her outfits for a specific purpose. If it was damaged or destroyed during said purpose, so be it. The outfit was just another uniform of the day to her. Although she did wonder if the outfit was too much… but then again, as Kim had said, "damage."

Standing behind Michael was something else that shocked Lourina, as she knew that iconic blue jacket design from anywhere: the Federal Bureau of Investigation, or FBI, was now at play. Multiple jackets, actually! And one of those jackets approached the helicopter as it touched down, following closely behind Michael.

Lourina called out a single word of warning to her boss over the headset: "Feds." She avoided saying anything more in case the helicopter's black box was recording their chat. She didn't know that Santiago's aircraft had previously, and legally, disabled theirs.

Alan Kim nodded, seemingly unphased by the presence of federal agents. Lourina, meanwhile, had expected local law enforcement instead. Did the nearby national park somehow give the federal government jurisdiction over the case? Or maybe they found evidence in the park to justify their interest, making everything somehow connected? Or maybe there was something deeper in play? But for private investigator Sanches, these questions would have to wait. She had a mission to complete and other facts to obtain.

Once the helicopter landed it was safe for the duo to exit. The door opened and an unusually

bright and sunny day greeted them in return. Aircraft fuel could be smelled mixing with the nearby odor of ash and the fresh outdoors as the blades continued to rotate above them.

Lourina needed a moment to shield her eyes, cursing herself for not bringing her aviator-style sunglasses. *The one time I fly in a private jet and helicopter and I forgot to bring my damned aviator sunglasses…*

But Alan Kim, seemed to be enjoying the moment. As he stepped off the helicopter he spread his arms wide and called out to his audience over the deafening sounds. “Michael,” he began with a voice that sounded heavy. “I am so sorry for your loss.”

Kim looked as though he was heading over to hug the man. Lourina was slack jawed at the brazen actions by the executive, pondering if her version of “damage” was different than his.

As she stood watching the strange exchange, the bright sun, catching Kim’s golden watch, beamed a shaft of light directly into Lourina’s eyes. The design caught her attention—she had no idea what sort of watch it was, or who’d made it, but she could tell it was beyond her pay scale even now. Maybe it was made of literal pure gold? *That would be absurdly heavy to wear.*

However, no one was fooled by Kim’s comment nor by his inviting arms: least of all the widower of the deceased. Michael did not return any gesture—instead, he finally lost his patience.

“Are you kidding me?” The whites of Michael’s blue eyes were dark red from the dirt and ashes swirling around earlier, creating hints of dried tears as ash had been slowly wiped away while flowing down the paths of his cheeks. His hair was a mess, his clothes wrinkled.

This observation made Lourina grateful for the presence of the federal agents. She hoped they would keep these billionaires from killing each other on the helipad.

Maybe that’s why they’re here?

Michael’s voice started to rise as he repeated himself. “Are. You. Fucking. Kidding me?” he

called out. It was clear that the helicopter had been too much, but then again… *"damage."*

"Mike, my old friend," Kim said while trying to de-escalate the situation. "I came as fast as I could. I am so sorry for disturbing you and your family at a time like this. I hope you are well."

Behind Michael stood a single FBI agent, most likely the one in charge, who looked… well, shockingly calm given the situation.

Her face was gentle, showing creases that indicated she smiled often and liked to laugh. Her height and build appeared average enough to feel non-intimidating, even with her federal jacket. Her dark hair was wrapped into a professional bun. Her physical features reminded Lourina of her friends who were from Southeast Asia, but she could not determine if that was correct. The agent glided forward and professionally inserted herself between the two men.

"Mr. Alan Kim," she started off, apparently aware of his identity. The agent held out her hand in offering. "Senior Special Agent Jasmine Zenith, FBI." Her voice had a hint of an English accent.

That's unusual for the FBI, observed Lourina, saying nothing.

Kim jumped on this opportunity without hesitation, greeting the special agent with kindness and shaking her hand.

Michael Devine remained staring at Kim while his fists were visibly clenched, yet he did nothing else. After a few more heartbeats, Michael simply turned around and departed. Lourina overheard a few choice words from him while he walked away—words that even made her blush—and that was saying something!

Oh. My. God, Lourina gossiped to herself. *I am so glad I can pretend to be a ditzy escort right now, because this is all fucking insane.* On the bright side Lourina had another crazy story to share at the bar. But for now, she dared not to speak until someone spoke to her. Instead, she took the opportunity to look around casually and gather information.

“And,” the voice of Alan Kim suddenly caught Lourina’s attention, causing her to look back to him to see both he and the FBI agent staring at her. “This is Ms. Sanches.” He smiled with joy at Lourina, who was now in play on this absurd political stage.

“Pleasure to meet you,” Lourina said to the FBI agent, offering her hand. *You offered my name to the FBI pretty quickly there, Alan.*

“Likewise, Ms. Sanches.” The agent smiled at the private investigator as she returned the handshake, her expression far too relaxed for the situation at hand. Lourina felt a chill spreading down her spine… but she couldn’t figure out why. There was something off about this “Jasmine Zenith,” and not just her subtle accent.

“I hope our entrance wasn’t too distracting,” Lourina offered, unsure how to approach the subject. Kim shot her a side-eye glance in warning, apparently unhappy with her discussing their illegal entrance. Special Agent Zenith smiled and shook her head.

“Not at all, Ms. Sanches. We understand.”

And just like that, a felony was averted. Santiago ruled the field. There would be no arrests for disrupting a crime scene, nor for any other kind of recklessness they displayed. Lourina’s heart beat heavily at the idea of being arrested just days after securing her firm’s stability. In the distance, Lourina also noticed that some press and news teams were taking photos from across the road. A few were now taking pictures of them, specifically. Lourina ignored her voyeuristic audience: she had a job to do.

“Senior Special Agent Zenith,” Kim’s voice was fake and sad again. “Please let Santiago know if there is anything we can do to help with the case.” His eyes gleamed with pleasure. “We’ll do everything we can.”

“Thank you, Mr. Kim, but that won’t be necessary.” Zenith casually dismissed the offer. “We

have more than enough resources to figure this out." She smiled as she casually dismissed the offer.

Lourina wanted to ask investigative questions but she couldn't risk giving away her undercover profile. She needed to pretend to be an escort; therefore, she had to act like an escort.

"It's all just so… horrible," Lourina said with sincerity, using vague and abstract words.

"Arson cases are usually that way, Ms. Sanches," Zenith agreed.

Kim shook his head. "Do you know what happened? How did it start?"

The special agent shook her head in return. "I'm sorry, Mr. Kim, but we cannot comment on an active investigation at this time." Her eyes slowly met his and gave a wink. "Though, of course, we will happily share the information with the public once the case is over."

"I understand. Thank you, agent Zenith." Kim added a little softness into his voice to play along. "We won't remain long or disrupt your schedule any further. Please give us just a few minutes."

…

A few comments were said and some pleasantries exchanged, providing the FBI special agent with enough satisfaction to leave them alone and return to the main building. Now Lourina and Alan were able to speak privately with each other for the first time since landing. Kim kept his smile up and looked around the outside perimeter of the complex.

Lourina broke the silence and quietly whispered to her boss. "Why is the FBI here?"

Mr. Kim didn't flinch, but his voice became dark and serious. "I don't know. It might be a favor for Mike." His eyes were taking in the surrounding destruction, scanning everything he saw. "Find out what you can. Quietly."

Lourina nodded and then acted like a flirt, playfully touching his arm and giggling before walking off.

She knew the deal. She had worked enough crime scenes to know how to avoid antagonizing the staff or interfering with the case. Well, more than they already had. Now Lourina was a temporary VIP to be ignored or entertained. With her orders in mind, Lourina roamed the complex while maintaining a respectful distance from everyone else. Her mind was trying to absorb as much information as possible.

After a few minutes, she risked taking her phone out and pretending to write messages on it; meanwhile, she was actually taking the occasional photo and video for her own private evidence.

Her mind was still deciphering how the fire started. From above, the line was a clean cut, and the apparent origin was down the hill—it would be far too steep to climb normally. It was also too thick with foliage that no one could simply walk a line from within the brush and survive setting it all that flame. She'd need to remember to take some photos from the helicopter when they depart later.

But as Lourina turned around the corner, she stopped dead in her tracks. Standing right in front of her was Michael Devine, alone, staring off towards the lake. He was ignorant of her presence, seemingly attached to the view of the water. Lourina took a moment to collect herself and slowly retreat, heading back towards the corner she had just turned. But before she could make her escape, a phantom hand grabbed her right arm.

Lourina felt herself being restrained. She used all her training and willpower to remain calm and avoid making a scene. She braced herself, ready to either twist the arm or to turn and kick at a sensitive area with all her might. She snapped her head to face the offender, ready to snarl, but only saw Michael Devine's bloodshot eyes up close.

They were horrifying. She tensed her body and remained ready.

Michael moved a step towards her, bringing himself far closer than was comfortable or

acceptable. He then leaned in and whispered quietly enough only for Lourina to hear.

"If I find out Santiago put a hit on Jade," Michael started, letting his voice linger for a moment to ensure that Lourina fully realized what he was saying. "I will find you. *And I will fucking kill you all."*

Lourina said nothing in return. She was legitimately shocked and unaware of what to say. Did he see through her cover? But before she could think of anything else, Michael let go of his grasp and walked away, absent mindedly roaming for his next target.

It took multiple heart beats before Lourina could continue on her original path. Shit like this is why she really hated family drama. But now her mind was swirling with new questions. *Did Santiago do this? Is that why Alan Kim wanted to be here? To see what the FBI knows?*

After enough photos, Lourina decided she had risked enough for today and head back to Kim. She estimated they couldn't stay much longer and she wanted to see more from above. Taking a quick glance down, Lourina noticed her black boots were now turning gray from the ash, along with some lower portions of her sweater dress, most likely due to the wind and helicopter's rotating blades.

She sighed to herself. *Fuck.*

Next to the helicopter, Kim appeared to be talking with someone she did not recognize. As Lourina approached, she felt as though she was being watched again, similar to how she had felt back in Port Angeles. Looking around, Lourina quickly found her stalker: the eyes of Agent Zenith, staring at her from across the complex. While it was difficult for Lourina to see from this distance, she swore a smile grew across the face of the federal agent.

And then Lourina swore she noticed something more shocking: the FBI senior special agent seemingly winked at Lourina before turning around and disappearing back into the complex.

Lourina stood by herself for a moment to digest what was happening; the pieces of the puzzle were slowly moving into place, yet the shape remained elusive.

But Lourina knew one thing: Special Agent Zenith was a wolf in sheep's clothing. Those eyes from earlier were not looking at Lourina, they were dissecting Lourina. They saw through her. And that cute little wink was a message: *I'm watching you.*

Lourina felt somehow violated, as if Zenith was a mortician casually collecting information from her as though she was a routine corpse. Especially with Lourina still emotionally reeling after Michael. Lourina felt something inside her that warned her about Zenith, that the agent could somehow see through Lourina's cover, like when two undercover agents recognize each other's presence. Some form of acknowledgment between players in the game.

That's why she's here, Lourina realized. *She's an FBI version of me. Which means… maybe they don't know what happened, either? But they also don't want to risk upsetting the political situation at work. They're slowly inserting themselves into the drama: listening, searching, observing.*

But for Jade's murderer—or for something else?

And what does that mean for me?

And now Lourina began to ponder whether she could tell all of this information to her new boss… because what if he was actually involved? Hell, what if the FBI was helping him clean this up? Could Lourina be a future witness for his plausible deniability? Lourina remembered her time back at her department as to how her superiors always avoided working with the FBI whenever possible.

Then again this is what happens when you work for a billionaire, isn't it? Her celebration from the night before was starting to feel a bit premature. *Did I make a mistake?* She didn't know. But

once Lourina heard the helicopter's engine gaining strength again, she knew it was time for her to go. There was a limit to how much Santiago could pretend to keep their involvement legitimate to even the public. Every action, or inaction, calculated and contained.

Their work had been done: their information collected, the drama inflamed, and the damage dispensed. The local police had deferred the situation to the FBI, and the FBI had then split their interests between Michael and Alan equally, remaining cautiously in between the giants and out of their line of fire.

And Lourina, having entered this new political stage, would have plenty of time to think about all of this on her multiple flights back.

Fuck.

CHAPTER 10 — QUARTZ

THEODORE WAS ECSTATIC, the happiest the man had felt in years.

Sitting in a booth, he savored the moment and enjoyed the meal before him. The refreshing glass of water, the local and delicious salmon, along with a bowl of freshly picked fruit and vegetables to accompany his appetite.

Theodore also read the latest news on his mobile device with joy. He began by reading local stories before allowing himself to "wander" towards the article about Jade Devine (he hoped to cover his digital trail that way). Now reading Jade's article, the man consumed every detail, every comment, and every inch of the news with glee. Few of his kills ever made it onto the news outside of a local obituary.

His expensive lunch was a cover but it also doubled as pleasure. He needed to establish a cover story and create a trail of evidence away from the crime scene. It had been a couple of nights since the assassination, however, Theodore refused to return to his home until this morning. He needed to work hard and move quickly to build his cover.

Immediately following his retreat from Lake Chelan, the killer had driven to his secondary point: Quartz Mountain, a camping location between Lake Chelan and Richland.

Upon arrival to his remote spot, Theodore padded out the camping site with evidence. The man carefully placed trash across different areas of his campsite, leaving out stickers with "best buy" dates and other information to distort the timeline. He used bags of trash he had accumulated while observing Jade Devine, needing the location to appear used, as though he had been here all along. While littering the environment was reprehensible to Theodore, he believed that his actions were for the greater good.

And as for his drone, Sherman? The memory card was destroyed, all serial numbers

professionally removed, and the veteran drone donated to a rural school along the ride back. Some local donation bin with no nearby cameras—after wiping the drone down for prints, of course. Plus a little note attached "For You: Commercial Drone, Never Flown." He knew someone would figure out the connection someday—but by then he'd be long gone. Until then, why not give back to the community?

And the boots he wore? Torn up, burned in the campfire: their ashes spreading across the mountain. His SUV? Well, he still had that at least—but he'll find someone in a random city to take that off his hands during a "sale." He had spent extra time figuring out where to drive and park at each site to minimize vehicle tracks. *Might be time to switch to snow tires and get rid of the old ones.*

After two nights of camping by himself, Theodore decided it was time for him to go home. While he had slept in peace, he'd kept his pistol hidden under his sleeping bag in case of any unwanted visitors. He also wondered if he'd made any mistakes, or left any loose ends, that might lead attention back to him. He wasn't afraid of the police; rather, he was afraid of another assassin. He needed to be smarter about handling things going forward.

Going after a billionaire had been the highlight of his life—and his life was already full of highlights. But going after someone so powerful also brought with it insane risks. If a competent enough assassin was hired to track down Jade's killer, Theodore might find himself in a scary situation.

But he hoped the investigation would dissolve over time by way of political infighting; competing interests who destroyed each other by quarreling over piles of money and messing with the evidence. Perhaps some poor competitor will be falsely blamed for Jade's death. Unfair, yes, but that was simply how the game was played at this level. Once you hit the billions, you were at

play.

For now, Theodore forced himself to take things slowly and to enjoy the present moment. He wanted to finally quit, to cash in all his work and use the safe houses and equipment stashes he had accumulated around the country following a decade of work. He could easily disappear tonight and retire quietly. But Theodore enjoyed the thrill of the hunt; his latest kill reminding him as to why he enjoyed this lifestyle. He couldn't retire. *No, not now.*

But perhaps next year? He pondered this question for a moment, but he did not know the answer. For now there was more work to be done. Using cash to pay for his meal, Theodore departed the restaurant before visiting a nearby cafe for some coffee.

At least, that was his official reason for visiting. In reality, Theodore needed something "stronger" than coffee for his taste.

He needed an alibi.

...

"Yani!" Theodore called out with joy while walking into his favorite local coffee store, Colima Café.

Yanira, who goes by Yani with her friends, had known Theodore for multiple years now. Not the real Theodore, of course, but the man who he pretended to be, a boring, traveling corporate man entering his mid-life.

The young lady from behind the counter looked up and smiled at Theodore. Her long brunette hair was tied neatly into a bun while she worked. Despite wearing a slightly baggy service uniform, her athletic body clearly showed through her barista outfit. Had Theodore been a decade younger, he might have flirted with the lady in her late twenties. But the only thing he craved was something else—he needed Yani to finalize his cover story.

"Mr. Hudson!" Yani called out, the verbal exchange causing the single customer at the counter to look up in confusion, seemingly alarmed by the commotion, before returning their attention back towards the drink Yani was preparing. Theodore waited patiently behind the single customer in line while he contemplated how to sow his seeds of deception.

Yani seemed genuinely happy for the distraction after seeing her old friend. "You've been away for a while," she commented observingly. *Good, she'd noticed.*

"Hiking," Theodore clarified. "Quartz Mountain this time."

"Quartz? Where is that at?"

"A little ways northwest of here."

"Huh, you'll have to tell me about it." Yani thanked her first customer and handed them their drink. While the customer departed the cafe, Yani returned to her post at the cash register. "Anyway, what can I get for you today, Mr. Hudson?"

"The usual, please."

Yani nodded, accepting his credit card for payment while also grabbing a nearby empty cup. She started up her press and collected all the ingredients needed to make his drink the way Theodore liked it. Meanwhile, as the machine started up, Theodore kept planting information strategically. He hoped to overwhelm her with information while she worked.

"Two weeks, you know," he called out to her.

"What?" Yani could barely hear him over the sounds of the grinding coffee.

"Quartz Mountain," he lied while raising his voice. "Two weeks there. Good times."

"Two weeks?" She shook her head. "Way too long."

Theodore knew that he needed to tread carefully during this conversation. Planting memories and gaslighting people took years of experience. He needed someone who would be willing to

defend him if he was ever investigated. If he could get Yani to believe—and remember—the details of his trips, it would provide future cover stories that matched his own.

To ensure his plan succeeded, Theodore had gone to Quartz Mountain on his way to Jade's complex *before* he started his stakeout. He'd scoped out a future spot to lay-low and did some rough work to establish enough plausible deniability in terms of a timeline. He left behind some materials that would degrade and give a chronological history as far as to how long he had resided in the location, such as items of food and other biodegradables. A week and a half later—once his attack had begun—he'd returned to the mountain and pretended that nothing had happened.

"A fortnight," Theodore laughed and shook his head.

The sound of the grinder stopped, Yani looked over at him with puzzlement. "What? Isn't that a game?" She then poured a cup of coffee straight from the machine.

Theodore was legitimately confused at first before responding. "No," he said. "A fortnight is two weeks." *What is she talking about?*

Yani stared at him for a moment before rolling her eyes. Their generational differences were simultaneously obvious and yet hidden. Still, the pair had known each other for multiples years now and were used to such odd, short, and disjointed conversations. Thanks, of course, to Theodore.

Here comes the fun part. Theodore prepared himself: he knew *exactly* what to say to shock his "friend." This part had become both business and pleasure for him.

"Sorry, you know I don't play video games." The man shrugged innocently. "And that I'm a bit old school and enjoy my solitude. Hell, I had forgotten my phone back at my apartment during the hike—but that was okay, I was still able to enjoy the fresh air."

Yani's eyes suddenly went wide. "You—what?! For a fort… week? Two weeks?!"

The humble man shrugged. “Who needs a phone on them all the time?” *Not counting the unactivated burner for emergencies, of course.*

“What if there had been an emergency? What if you had gotten lost or hurt?”

Theodore grinned at the barista. “What’s life without a little risk?” *Or evidence?*

The barista shook her head at her strange customer, clearly thinking he was a crazy old man… which suited Theodore just fine. He had actually removed his phone from his roving cleaner before leaving it next to his bed during the two weeks he stalked Jade. There the phone sat unmoving, as if forgotten, tying his lies together.

“You’re lucky to get so many vacations, Mr. Hudson.”

“Perks of being a contractor, Yani.”

Theodore liked Yani. He regretted having to include her in his plans. He tried his best to insulate her from any of his messes—straddling some weird middle ground between “civilian” and “player” in the corporate world. It was risky, but the man needed cover stories to give him insurance from the government. And now he needed insurance from corporations, too. He wasn’t entirely sure how to finalize that last part, though.

Grasping his custom-made cup of coffee, Theodore drank the contents while catching up with Yani. She told him about her life: her latest adventures, a recent date that had gone wrong, and a few stray thoughts about her future. Theodore listened sincerely and gave Yani advice he felt truly mattered.

In a small, selfish way, Theodore sincerely believed that his mentorship with the young lady would somehow absolve himself from using her—especially for one who considered him to be a friend.

…

Back at his apartment, Theodore initiated the next phase of his operation: information. He retrieved his hidden laptop that he reserved for special occasions, stored deep within his walls. The laptop was tricked out by some of the latest tech off the market for security: a non-standard operating system, full drive encryption, virtual private network, complimentary secured router, you name it. Theodore then logged into an encrypted email client and contacted his professional network through their aliases.

He needed help. Professional help. And the small group of assassins he personally trusted were the only ones he knew that could help. He sent out a few "feeler" emails, inquiring about any "recent changes" since he'd been away. While he was sure that his associates would see through his ruse, he avoided risking them any incriminating evidence—just in case he had miscalculated his trust. There was always the risk that one of his associates worked for, or even liked, Jade Devine and thus might feel conflicted in how they'd respond to his actions.

Mixing loyalties, money, and clandestine operations made for one hell of an unstable combination. Still, Theodore minimized his risks and played coy with his phrasing to each contact. He knew their responses would take a while to arrive—his network has similar unpredictable schedules and paranoia with communicating just like him. But depending on how his network responded would be a clue as to whether his stealth had been successful or not.

Any deviations from how his group reacted to his messages would be enough information to tip him off. But until then, Theodore needed to remain calm and pretend that everything was okay. And in a weird way, everything was.

Returning his laptop to its hidden compartment, Theodore walked back to his living room and tried to decompress. His television was on—it was always on, of course—and he let himself turn up the volume before sitting down. Even when he was away, he would leave the screen on so that

no one could compare his viewing habits to identify whether he was actually home or not. He wasn't sure if the device also recorded any other inputs, such as menu commands, so he rarely modified the settings other than to change the volume occasionally. Hell, Theodore never even changed the channel. Even his lights had timers for consistent power usage.

FOMO News was on and having another discussion about random celebrities, hyping up how wonderful the economy was, and leaking local gossip to placate their viewers. Theodore watched with curiosity as news reporters discussed how the Santiago cleaning crews were slowly spreading across the state. Soon, Theodore would begin seeing some of those crews in Richland.

Good. He liked that. There was too much trash in the world. Of course, his trash on Quartz Mountain, was serving a purpose.

But once a report about Jade Devine started on the screen, Theodore found himself enthralled. He dared not raise the volume again (just in case the device recorded that) and instead sat closer to the screen—like a child on the floor, listening intensely. He let the moment wash over him, treasuring it. The man found himself oddly flattered that his work had made the evening news.

"And speaking of Jade Devine and Santiago," the group of reporters made a segue, "how about that entrance by Alan Kim a few days ago?" The group around the table nodded their heads like chickens in agreement, "oohing" and "aahing" while reviewing the videos of the golden helicopter landing at the burnt complex.

"The internet is still aflame about the moment Santiago's Chief Operating Officer took his time to show his respects after the suspected murder of Mrs. Jade Devine."

Something inside Theodore began to feel off. He wasn't sure what or why, but he was starting to feel… jealous? He couldn't quite place what he was feeling. *What's happening?*

"Oh man," one of the talking-heads on the screen began. "I still can't believe how beautiful

those golden helicopters are. And to see how much Santiago cares about our local community is just the icing on the cake." The others on the screen agreed with them.

What is going on? Theodore started to understand what he was feeling, but it still confused him. *Why are they talking about* Santiago? *Who the fuck cares about Santiago? A billionaire is dead!*

The FOMO News team went on a long tangent about that singular moment, spending more time discussing Alan Kim's arrival than about the murder of Jade Devine itself. Theodore felt himself twitch. A billionaire had been murdered and the media only cared about some random asshole's method of travel to the crime scene.

The clip never showed what happened after the helicopter landed, only repeating the descent. Someone on the screen made a joke, causing the other hosts to laugh.

It felt… unfair. It was wrong. Theodore's returning ego couldn't stand having someone take away his first independent moment from him. He had finally struck back at the system and all it did was… laugh?

He stared at the photo of Alan Kim's headshot while the golden helicopter touched down on the screen. He also heard their laughter. Nothing else on the screen mattered.

Theodore was sickened by this. He hated it. All of it.

He could feel the dam inside him breaking once again.

This news segment inadvertently caused Theodore to do something unexpected. Something he hadn't done in a long time. Something he would never have done for anyone else.

He turned off the television.

And he started packing.

CHAPTER 11 — CLEANUP

LOURINA WAS SURPRISED. Quite some time had passed since the duo had left the complex of Jade Devine and yet her companion had not asked her anything, such as her observations.

She had prepared multiple vague answers ahead of time, ready to give her new boss the information while on their flights back to SEATAC. But the executive had decided to take a short nap and tuned everything out.

To pass the time on their (admittedly short) flights, Lourina changed back into her usual outfit of jeans and a purple hoodie on the private plane before attempting to remove as much ash from her old set of clothes as possible. The ash seemed to love her sweater dress in particular—because it *refused* to let go. She grumbled and damned the designer for their choice of fabric.

Upon landing at SEATAC, a private convoy of bulletproof SUVs escorted them back to Mr. Kim's complex on Mercer Island. Lourina wondered why they risked taking a vehicle the remainder of the route; however, she said nothing of her observation.

Gathering inside the midnight black SUV, Lourina was once again faced with the woman she had seen back at Ocean Shores—the one who handed her the letter about David's contract.

The woman appeared to be in her early forties, displaying an aura of calmness that Lourina found fascinating. She wondered if the woman was prior military or had some other life experience that matched her demeanor. Her eyes always looking out the window and scanning for danger, preventing Lourina from observing them directly.

Are we expecting trouble? Lourina wanted to ask this out loud but felt that Alan Kim would have told her if they were. Instead, Lourina settled on the assumption that the woman simply took her job seriously—and left that train of uncomfortable thought alone.

The drive was short. When they approached the complex, their SUV unexpectedly turned onto

a backroad and headed towards the facilities' rear entrance, ignoring the gun-free zone signs and the armed Santiago patrol at the front entrance. Lourina wasn't sure why the driver wasn't going to drop Kim off at the front door; however, she let herself relax and ignored the change in protocol. She was going to follow the lead of those around her.

Upon approaching the complex from behind, Lourina noticed subtle changes to the design and layout in comparison to the front. For one, the back road was almost like a trench: lower in elevation than the rest, and providing cover for the vehicles to move without being seen. She also realized that none of the cameras in the complex were facing this direction—that last part really got her attention. Now she was curious enough to scan for other changes that might explain to her as to why this route was different. There was no way a blind spot like this was by accident.

"Notice anything?" Kim probed Lourina, catching her off guard. He must have caught her looking.

When she turned her head to face her boss, she noticed the woman across from her was now using her peripheral vision to monitor Lourina. Lourina pondered why the woman was suddenly curious about her. Still, the private investigator answered the question from her boss.

"Yes," she said. "No cameras."

"Mmmm," replied Kim. His response felt somehow neutral and incomplete.

Am I wrong? Lourina wasn't sure. *Did I miss something?* Yet the woman across from Lourina seemed satisfied with her answer and went back to monitoring outside the vehicle. Kim, meanwhile, returned to his internal thoughts.

Upon their arrival at the back entrance, the security detail exited first and met up with the other team stationed at the complex. Kim, meanwhile, started reading something on his phone that appeared to be bothering him. The driver of the SUV, who had stayed quiet during the entire drive,

informed Lourina to leave her suitcase—full of her damaged clothes—in the SUV since he would be the one driving her back to her office afterwards. She thanked him for his help. *I could get used to this.*

The group walked through the rear complex, designated as the "Service Entrance." Upon entering the doors, and going down a hallway, Lourina realized she was now inside the main kitchen. It was massive, industrial, and easily designed to fit multiple full-time chefs and their respective teams. And yet she saw no one cooking. *Curious…*

Risking a moment to appear naïve, Lourina decided to break the silence. "So," she said. "About Jade." *Smooth, Lourina.*

"Yes?" Kim responded, his curiosity finally providing her with his full attention. They were still walking together through the complex and heading towards his office.

"Something's wrong."

"What do you mean?"

Private investigator Sanches bit her lower lip in nervousness, unsure how her new boss would take the following comment. But hey, she decided to "take a swing" at it anyway.

"It was too clean."

Alan Kim stopped dead in his tracks and stared at her for a moment with interest. "Too clean?"

Lourina didn't expect that response—she quickly turned back around to face her boss. "The hit," she clarified.

Alan Kim moved closer to Lourina, probing her. "What do you mean by too clean?"

Ah, shit. Here we go…

"Her murder," started Lourina. "It was a hit job. Clearly. But it was also too clean. Something's weird about it. It's not sending a message that anyone seems to know."

The blonde woman from the security detail, upon hearing this conversation, said nothing and walked away. Lourina wasn't sure if the woman simply didn't want to hear the details or maybe had another task to perform elsewhere. *Or maybe I am saying things I shouldn't?*

Taking a moment to compose himself, Kim sighed deeply in concern. "Yes," was his only response.

Lourina waited a dozen heartbeats for him to explain. But he didn't. Now she was feeling slightly annoyed, hopeful that Kim wasn't playing another game with her—just as he had during their first meeting. The man shook his head and walked through the door to his office. Lourina followed him, watching as the man approached his cabinet and looked at his alcohol collection.

His hands were slightly trembling. *Is that new?*

"Someone broke the peace," he said softly.

Lourina did not expect this response. She was puzzled by his words. "The peace?"

Kim picked up a random glass and stared at it intensely. The light shining through his office window reflected off the surface of the glass and created small rainbows on the wall beside him.

He took another deep breath and shook his head. "I had hoped it wouldn't come to this." His mind was filling with dread, his voice was hoarse, and his body stance looked weak.

What is going on? Lourina braced herself. *Come to what?*

The executive took his time to place the empty glass back onto the counter before retrieving a bottle of liquor. But while he poured himself a shot, his shaking hands spilled some of the contents onto the counter. He cursed to himself and left the fresh drink alone.

"There is an agreement," he finally said. "Between the players." He put the bottle of alcohol away but left the glass and the spill where they remained. "We leave each other alone."

To Lourina, the man's head was clearly somewhere elsewhere. "What players?"

Alan Kim walked to his desk and sat directly on it, facing Lourina. He looked as though he was a teacher who was attempting to level with a student. “The ones in the game.”

“The game?”

“How does the United States government work, detective?” His question caught her off guard. For a split second, Lourina didn’t know how to respond. Her mind went blank and an old training manual came back to her memory. She read it out loud.

“Three branches: legislative, executive, and judicial. One to make laws, one to enforce laws, and one to judge laws.”

“And what else?”

“Then there is the ‘fourth estate,’ also known as the media, who act as the people’s transparency into this process.”

“Correct on all counts,” he said with a soft but weak smile.

“So,” Lourina clarified. “These are the players?”

“NO!” Kim replied sharply, startling her. “These are the pieces on the board.”

Lourina said nothing, too shocked and confused by everything from today to fully comprehend where he was going with this. Money in politics wasn’t news, after all.

“Lourina,” Mr. Kim started more gently. “Who are the players in the game?”

Taking a moment to think, Lourina formulated her answer. She believed she knew what he was searching for. *Hope I’m right… well, maybe not.*

“Their donors,” she said.

“Correct.”

For a while neither of them spoke. The executive and the private investigator stared at each other in silence. Mr. Kim looked away, out the window, appearing to let his mind wander.

"Those of us with power have an unspoken rule: we don't touch each other." He shook his head. "It's too messy. Too dangerous. It would destroy the game."

"But…" Lourina was perplexed by his statement. "Assassinations happen all the time. Even I know that from my law enforcement days. There's always a game being played."

Alan Kim nodded his head. "Yes, but those are our pawns." He was now staring at his ceiling, reminiscing or daydreaming—Lourina couldn't tell which. She only knew that the man was clearly thinking about something, because it was putting him in a strange mood.

"So," Lourina started. "Jade's murder has broken the peace between the billionaires." *And that's why you're nervous, Mr. Kim. Because you are now a piece on the board in the very game you play.*

"And no one knows why," he replied, continuing to stare out the window.

"Could it be a new player?" Lourina offered.

Kim shrugged. "I don't know. That's why I wanted you with me to visit the estate. We need to know as much information as possible to prepare our defense."

Lourina softly chuckled to herself. "You know, in a way, I'm glad we had this conversation." She noticed the man was now looking at her in confusion, causing her to feel slightly awkward. "I was beginning to suspect you killed her."

Kim laughed hard at the accusation. "Oh goodness, no!" For some reason this amused the man. "No, I would never be so sloppy." He smiled at her. "They never find my bodies." He winked at her, causing her to laugh nervously in response, unsure whether his comment was a joke or not. She wisely decided to avoid inquiring further.

Alan Kim looked over to his desk and then at his computer screen. It was off, but he stared at the dark monitor, anyway. Maybe he was looking at his reflection on the screen? Or maybe he was

simply staring in a random direction while his mind worked through the information at hand? He licked his lips nervously for a moment before scratching the back of his neck.

"Tyler is furious," he admittedly softly. "When he gets this way… well, things get scary. For everyone." Kim's hand began to notably shake once again.

Wait a second, Lourina had a moment of insight. *He's not afraid of Jade Devine or her killer. He's afraid… of Tyler?* Lourina wondered whether she should touch the man on his shoulders to show that she understood, or simply to calm him down. *I don't know.*

"Everyone?" her voice was quieter than she expected. It surprised Lourina. But it was loud enough for Kim to hear.

"Everyone," he said again.

…

Back at her office, private investigator Sanches sat atop her desk, finding herself unable to think clearly. She tried to distract herself by memorizing the names of her fish once again; however, it was to no avail. She stood and began to pace around her messy room. *One day I need to clean all this shit up.* But her mind remained elsewhere, just like what had happened with Kim earlier.

It was beginning to turn dark outside and she had nothing else to do today. Normally Lourina would have gone back to her apartment by now… but she didn't want to be alone. Not today. Even though there was no one in her office either, in a way, her fish companions provided her with needed comfort.

Kim hadn't clarified much beyond their earlier conversation. He did promise, though, to give Lourina a run-down of the culture and politics of the corporation during their next trip. This way she could better understand "the game." He wanted to gauge her thoughts and reactions—that's why he didn't tell her much early on—or so he claimed. A fresh start: a "tabula rasa."

Something about Alan Kim deeply disturbed Lourina. She barely knew the man, yet his fears over his boss seemed legitimate. He could stand before the FBI and win, but his hands would shake while reading messages from Tyler. But why would Tyler Santiago want his own COO afraid? And over the death of a competitor?

Aren't they on the same team? Doesn't Mr. Kim report *to Mr. Santiago?*

Things were not making sense to Lourina again. She wanted to clear her head, but she didn't want to go for a walk.

Peeking out her window, Lourina noticed something new in the neighborhood: a Santiago cleaning crew! They wore bright utility uniforms, almost orange-gold in reflection, and were ridding the streets of the trash piles—doing exactly what they had promised weeks ago. A white Santiago van was parked near the crew.

Taking a moment to think this opportunity over, the private investigator grabbed some government food vouchers off her desk and walked out her office and towards the cleaning crew.

After introducing herself as also working for Santiago—not technically correct, but she didn't want to confuse them, right? —she then gave them her vouchers and warned them to be careful on certain streets. They appreciated her kindness and passed along some local information in return. You would be surprised what support personnel saw from behind the scenes; no one pays attention to the janitor, but the janitor pays attention to you.

"So, do you guys… uh…" Lourina stumbled over her words for a moment, unsure how to phrase her question. "Travel to clean? Or live locally? How does this all work?"

One of the contractors, an older gentleman named Paul, answered her question on behalf of the team.

"We live locally, have set routines," he shrugged. "The main office expects these streets to keep

getting dirty for the first year or so of the program until the community stabilizes. Because of that our teams will periodically return to this location and others. After the first year is up, who knows what will happen to our contracts?"

Lourina nodded. "I understand. I'm sorry for digging—just curious."

"No worries, I get it."

"Hey," she added, "next time your team comes 'round, let me know, okay?" She pointed at her office. "That's my door. You guys are welcome to visit me anytime you need help. Also, I have a metric shit ton of vouchers I can share with you all." She grinned like a devil.

Paul smiled at the offer, seemingly entertained. A few of the other contractors, overhearing them, also appeared curious. They happily discussed some of the details with each other, another story for their group to share to keep themselves from boredom.

One of the crew, a young woman in her late twenties, broke off from the pack and caught up with Lourina for a moment. "Hey," she called out, her voice smooth and inviting, her light eyes gently catching Lourina's. "Thanks for sharing these with us."

"I thought you all deserved some fun," Lourina smiled at her.

"Definitely," she smiled back, her eyes taking a more thorough inventory of Lourina that hinted at her true appreciation. "Though it's a shame these aren't redeemable at certain locations, like Brandi's, but you know how our government is."

"Yeah," admitted Lourina, "a shame. It's such a fun bar."

"Especially this Saturday at eight," the unnamed woman winked and returned to her job without another word. Momentarily thrown and intrigued by the exchange, Lourina took a moment to collect herself before returning to her office.

After establishing all these new relationships, Lourina wondered if she could network deeper

into Santiago's community. Who knows what she could find? But first she needed to figure out what to do with her local community. *Maybe I'll stop accepting new clients for a while? Or maybe hire junior PI's and create a larger firm? But also…* her thoughts drifted back to the interaction with the mysterious woman. She bit her lip in contemplation, her thoughts both business and pleasure.

Countless opportunities began to overwhelm Lourina's mind.

CHAPTER 12 — INVASIVE

AN ENTIRE WEEK HAD PASSED since Theodore began stalking his new prey.

He knew that going after the king was risky—after all, he couldn't just go straight for Tyler in his tower south of downtown Seattle. Instead, the man needed to start with something smaller and work his way up to the top. And unless he wanted to die, he needed to make the death look accidental. He couldn't show his hand again. Not like with Jade.

Be smarter, Theodore, he reprimanded himself.

An idea had come to the killer after seeing the golden helicopter snatch away his glory; Theodore's full attention captured and ready to go. For the past week the man would take his new car, having traded in his SUV for an older sedan, and drive nearer the heart of Seattle and find places to hide it.

Arriving before the first light of dawn, Theodore would go kayaking on Lake Washington by himself, having purchased the kayak nearby with cash a few days prior.

At the end of each day he would hide the kayak in a nearby location amongst the brush and trash, hoping to disguise his prize amongst the pile. He knew there was a risk someone might take it, but he could always buy another one.

And so, for the past week, Theodore's daily routine remained the same. During the night, Theodore would drive an hour east—heading back towards his pre-established camping ground in the mountains before spending the night in his tent.

And each morning, he would leave his camp, drive to Seattle, and gather his kayak and wetsuit once again.

To pad out his paper trail, Theodore decided to start using his credit card at gas stations while going on his "camping trips." But whenever he needed more gas than was planned, he would

switch to using physical cash and keep those transactions separate.

Now his credit history would show a single pitstop to refuel during his time camping, which was in line with his distance from his apartment. He also made sure to change gas stations and avoid the same location twice, regardless of how annoying it was.

A week was all Theodore had needed. Whilst monitoring his target's movements, the assassin had discovered the back entrance to the large complex on Mercer Island. At first he wondered if his luck was really that fortuitous—a back entrance, with no cameras directly monitoring the location?

No, he quickly deduced. *This is the location for shady dealings. This is where I would have entered had Alan Kim engaged my services.*

Theodore tagged the back entrance as "possible, but dangerous."

People assumed that security details would have cameras everywhere. But for those in the underworld—or the "overworld" if you considered how everyone involved controlled the world like puppets—cameras were dangerous, equivalent to taking notes during a criminal fucking conspiracy. Network hacks, employee leaks, and law enforcement seizures were risks beyond your control.

For high-profile individuals it was wiser to have no evidence in the first place… what happened in the dark stayed in the dark.

But such locations were risky to assault. Who knows what sort of traps or hidden security waited in a back entrance? Theodore would need to remain calm, collected, and methodical in how he scoped out the complex. The back entrance was a last resort.

Every day the assassin moved closer. He would observe the support staff entering the facility, monitor the schedules of the guards, and listen to random employees. After sufficient observation,

Theodore risked the next step—conducting his first infiltration test.

While infiltration was Theodore's least favorite method for dealing with a target, it was the only method that he could pull off as a solo act in such a hostile environment. Alan Kim was too protected while traveling and while at work; meanwhile, his home was designed to repel large scale assaults, such as angry mobs, because no one would be crazy enough to go after a billionaire.

Not without an army behind them.

Social engineering was the name of the game—and Theodore knew this game better than anyone. His decades of work across multiple industries had taught the man enough to blend into any situation or location.

And yesterday? Theodore had succeeded. He had infiltrated the complex after "repossessing" a few pieces of clothing, along with a van from a regional delivery company who he observed making multiple deliveries to the complex at irregular hours.

It wouldn't be enough to fool an in-depth search, but it would be enough to ward off the casual glance from any guards while Theodore conducted his "deliveries." They didn't even question the deliveries themselves. They just escorted him to the kitchen, no one offering to carry the box of groceries on Theodore's behalf.

Today would be the second run and Alan Kim would return tomorrow. At least that's what his staff had said yesterday to each other. Theodore wasn't sure why the executive had left for a week, perhaps for a business trip? Who knows? But his time away meant that his best security team was also absent. So, Theodore played infiltration with the "B-Team," who he observed being lazy when escorting deliveries during the week. Some of them weren't even wearing vests under their suits—this wouldn't deter Theodore's armor piercing rounds, of course, but it was the principle of the matter. Even Theodore wore a class IIIA wraparound under his baggy clothes.

And two test runs were enough for the assassin to feel comfortable with the layout. After all, eventually someone who works at the mansion will go “hey, who keeps ordering all this food?” Thus Theodore kept his compact 9mm pistol and some extra “goodies” in his black cargo pants in case of emergency. He could always bail out at any time. Move on. Forget about Santiago.

But he wouldn’t do it. Theodore didn’t know why, but he was transfixed on this specific path. And he already had enough issues dealing with his desire—no, the urge—to leave a… calling card? Or some sort of “I Was Here” memento?

It was a dumb idea and would eventually get him caught, so he wrestled with his mind and ego before declaring that he would not leave anything behind for this kill, or any future kill. Besides, the assassin didn’t really care about Alan Kim personally.

He just wanted Tyler Santiago and his golden empire.

Also, Theodore didn’t want to risk involving third parties. Santiago was enough, even for Theodore’s skills. Why risk getting the FBI or some other agency involved? There should be no link between his murders, after all, Jade had been simply for pleasure—Alan Kim will be for training.

Each night Theodore sat in his tent and reflected on the situation silently. Where was all this heading? What was his end-game plan? Would he remain in Washington after killing Tyler Santiago, or would he flee the country? Perhaps he could go to South America, maybe to Brazil, and retire?

No, he couldn’t retire just yet. He needed to prove himself. He needed Tyler Santiago.

How bad is it in South America with climate change, anyway? Theodore barely kept up with the world since selling his soul to the corporate world over a decade ago. There was only so much for him to learn and understand.

He did hear a few comments about Australia, though. Something about… a "mighty black stump" or whatever. The group he overheard sounded enticed by the location, causing Theodore to create a mental note to review Australia, Brazil, and any other country he could think of before he would kill Tyler. Theodore needed to make sure he knew his options ahead of time.

Could he even retire? His forty-second birthday was fast approaching. He had multiple safe houses across the country, along with a decent number of identities left to burn. But could he really give it all up now? What would he even do if he retired?

Who is Theodore R. Hudson?

He dismissed these thoughts.

Theodore had begun monitoring those new Santiago cleaning crews that kept popping up around Seattle. It was fascinating to him, watching those uniformed teams slowly clearing out the city. He wanted to learn more about them before they arrived in Richland, desiring to better understand what to expect from their presence. After all, would they go poking around his place? Would they monitor him?

Perhaps not.

Or perhaps Theodore had developed a larger ego than he realized. He was still frustrated after being snubbed by FOMO News earlier. Just two days—two! After a billionaire was murdered! And all they could talk about was some stupid helicopter stunt and how amazing Santiago was for the community. So few actually seemed to care about Jade's murder, even when it had been clearly identified as a murder—but no one bothered to complain, except for her husband! Sure, the online comments had gone crazy with joy over "another overlord gone," but nothing had actually changed in normal day-to-day life from Theodore's point of view.

He only felt excitement when he envisioned himself going after the biggest fish in the ocean.

He always wondered if he could take on the best. Years of careful planning, training, and execution over countless operations had taught him everything he needed to know to become a modular weapon.

But what good is a single weapon against a global army? He had two options: he could either overpower that army through a singular act so overwhelming that it would be the social equivalent of a nuke; or he could work slowly, safely, and smartly in a manner that allowed him just enough leeway to pull off "the perfect crime."

Theodore preferred the latter option. While the former sounded fun, he also wanted to live. So he went with the latter. Get the job done, make a splash, and avoid detection. Besides, Theodore didn't like dramatics—although he preferred a more "personal touch" when it came to his plans.

Driving to the back entrance, Theodore knew his odds of getting discovered increased upon every infiltration. All it would take is for a single guard to be alert enough to notice something odd and everything would come crashing down. He couldn't risk more than three days of infiltrations. Also, the fleet manager for the regional delivery company would eventually notice a missing vehicle during their shift. Theodore tried hard to minimize all these risks.

Today was the last day. Tomorrow would be game day.

After sneaking in yesterday, Theodore found himself relaxing more than usual during this attempt, because the guards who had allowed him entry previously had now recognized him and let him in again. They seemed even more relaxed today than yesterday.

That's it, he thought to himself as he drove past the checkpoint. *Don't bother the guy with the food and flower deliveries. I'm just here to drop them off and I'll be on my way, like the day before. Still not wearing vests, I see. No outlines or anything. Cocky bastards, aren't you?*

Meanwhile, Theodore's eyes scanned every room, item, door, and face in the complex while

walking slightly past the kitchen and into the dining room today. Who knows what small detail could be the difference between life and death tomorrow?

Dropping off his supplies, Theodore smiled and thanked the guard that let him in. The guard was standing slightly behind him, escorting him as per the usual security procedure. Theodore regretted that the man would have to die tomorrow. *Oh well.*

All that was left for Theodore to do now was to get to the van, sneak the "borrowed" van back for the day, head back to his camp, and then prepare for Alan Kim's return tomorrow.

He was so close. He could feel his plan finalizing within his grasp. The night before was always his favorite. He could practically taste the success.

And besides, Theodore justified to himself as he placed his final package in the kitchen, *the news cares too much about Alan Kim. Why not give the people what they want? If they want a story about Alan Kim, I'll give them a story.*

And then I'll give them one about Tyler Santiago, too.

CHAPTER 13 — WATCH

STEEL IS HEAVY. Real damn heavy. And to Theodore, the idea of any man in their forties lifting a steel table was absurd. But the idea of getting shot was even more so.

Using all his strength the assassin flipped the steel table on its side. His timing was impeccable as a flurry of bullets started to fly in his direction, flattening and ricocheting against the table. The sounds rang from within the enclosed environment. *Pangs*, *pops*, and *cracks* resounded next to his head, sounding like a freight train of justice thundering down upon him. His blood was surging.

Theodore's plan had failed. What should have been the final piece of surveillance had unexpectedly turned into a shootout. While Theodore knew the final part of his plan had carried some risk, the early return of Alan Kim—along with another squad of armed bodyguards—was not part of that calculation. *They were supposed to arrive tomorrow!*

The executive had returned one day early; Theodore, unfortunately, bumped into the first guard from Kim's convoy while he was turning around a corner to exit back through the kitchen after dropping off the box of groceries. The suited guard, in surprise at being touched, reached out to restrain Theodore.

Theodore didn't appreciate that.

He had remembered how strange it had felt when he'd stalked the interior of the complex over the past few days— he'd noticed how the security cameras were also absent within the kitchen. So many odd little details accumulating in Kim's compound. But now the assassin was grateful for all the camera blind spots.

Before the guard reached him, Theodore had it all worked out. He was one hallway away from his "borrowed" vehicle, yet now he was thrown into the lion's den by mistake. He knocked the guard back. The other guards reacted in alarm and drew their weapons. It was a shame, really,

everything in here was spotless, so beautiful and shiny. *Well, before the shootout.*

Crouching on the floor, Theodore cursed himself for not planning for an unexpected return. Quickly pulling out his concealed pistol, Theodore smoothly toggled the safety from his trusty service weapon and forced himself to take a moment to take stock and to control his breathing. He carried an extended magazine of twelve rounds, plus two spare magazines of similar amounts, giving him a total capacity of thirty-six rounds.

This was enough ammo for most issues—but getting surrounded by a squad of bodyguards? These were not good odds, especially when factoring in that he was also alone, surprised, and pinned down. He needed more ammo before he could conduct suppressive fire. *How did I not hear them arriving?*

And who knows what sort of weapons these guards were using, so it was unlikely he could resupply from their bodies during the firefight. Not until he needed to, at least. And more guards were approaching from their posts and rapidly reinforcing the main group.

Thankfully, when the shooting had started, a large steel catering table had been next to Theodore and provided the man with both cover and concealment. He was able to crawl around and stay low, giving him time to update his plans before executing them.

Despite the table being made from pure steel, it relentlessly pressed against Theodore's back and created a painful sting when the swarm of bullets transferred their inertia upon the stationary object. While the table shielded him from death, his body would be sore for quite a while.

On the bright side, he reassured himself, *at least they didn't catch me in the dining room.* That grandiose dining table—while pretty—would have turned Theodore into Swiss cheese with its thin wooden design.

I have a better idea.

After the initial round of gunfire, silence crept into the complex. Everyone in the kitchen enjoyed an unhealthy dose of tinnitus while coming to terms with the situation. A few of the guards began to move in and flank the table, taking their time to drift between cover while the others provided overwatch—ready to fire at a moment's notice. Theodore was outmanned, outgunned, and out of time.

The sounds of crunching plates and glass could be heard as multiple thick boots prowled towards Theodore, sounding like a pack of wolves stalking their prey in a winter forest, stepping on the snow and fallen twigs beneath their feet.

Unfortunately for the guards, their ringing ears and barking commands to each other had prevented them from hearing Theodore opening his black cargo pants and pulling out his secondary tool, one he kept hidden inside the baggy delivery clothes. A second later and a shiny metallic canister flew into the air and arched over the table before landing next to the approaching guards.

"Grenade!" a woman's voice shouted from afar.

As everyone in the room scrambled, Theodore covered his ears, closed his eyes, and tucked his head into his chest. *Let there be light*, he thought to himself. The flashbang grenade obliged.

The guards had expected a fragmentation grenade—more worried about potentially being shredded than getting a concussion. The kitchen, full of metal, turned into an echo chamber of reflecting light, misty smoke, and bouncing sound waves that only amplified the resulting distortion and chaos.

Theodore had been slightly affected by the device too, but he was able to recover faster than the guards. He stood up, firing at the closet target in a suit in the center of their mass. *Pop*, *pop*, *pop*.

Despite his compact pistol being quieter than the guard's, it was still loud enough to make him grumpy. Especially indoors.

Three, Theodore told himself.

He controlled his breathing, stepping around the table and moving towards a nearby wall while maintaining his aim at the next stumbling guard. *Pop*, *pop*.

By the time the assassin had reached the wall, both Santiago guards were on the ground, blinded, concussed, and bleeding out. One was not moving. Theodore took a rapid scan of the scene before him and identified his remaining targets. He noticed he could flank the overwatch group, provided he moved fast enough.

Five, he reminded himself.

Time was running out. In a few seconds the guards would recover from the stun grenade. But Theodore knew the room's layout and hoped that his escape plan would work. Pressed against the wall, Theodore realized he could now fire upon another guard, although his best chance was to get into another firing position. Rushing forward and laying low, the assassin flanked the overwatch group—four guards in a line—and grabbed the closet one.

"What?" the guard asked in a slurred speech, visibly shocked by the physical contact. The guard raised his pistol in alarm but Theodore was already moving behind him. With a hearty shove the guard was pushed out of his cover and out into the open room.

"There he is!" Theodore shouted in a commanding voice. "Open fire!" He stepped back from the group and towards the wall again.

The stumbling guard panicked for a moment before regaining his composure. He shook his buzz-cut head and started to walk back towards Theodore while raising his gun to aim at the assassin.

The remaining guards, still dazed by the effects of the flashbang, did not hesitate to deal with their new perceived threat. They only saw a target rapidly approaching them with a gun drawn. They foolishly moved out of their cover and fired upon the exposed guard, using all their remaining ammo to cleanse the room.

Theodore moved behind them again. He rapidly reloaded, letting the distraction provide him with enough time to get a full magazine so that he could deal with so many targets. The old magazine slipped and fell somewhere on the floor—a frustrating loss, but he needed to move on. Taking a moment to line up his sights and performing a calming breath, Theodore announced his new internal count: *zero.*

Stepping out from his cover, Theodore aimed at the group of guards before him. He counted off ten shots as he unloaded, dropping all three guards at the table and another two guards at the corner before anyone could realize what was happening. Theodore also noticed a few guards on the ground, still moving, so he put a single bullet each into the two most active. *Twelve,* he announced to himself.

A crunch was heard behind him and the assassin dove back into cover. He rapidly reloaded once again, using his final spare magazine. As he took another deep breath, the man contemplated what to do.

Zero, he reminded himself, amused that his count aligned with his available reloads. Bullets whizzed past Theodore as he finished reloading, causing him to flinch from the ricochets that bounced around him. *Oh fuck*, he scolded himself, *I forgot!*

Despite successfully overtaking most of the guards, Theodore's new position was also exposed to the remaining three that had ushered Alan Kim down the hallway. Now his left thigh suddenly burned, along with a feeling of wetness leaking down his leg. Adrenaline was surging as Theodore

returned a small volley of suppressive fire to buy him some time, aiming at nothing.

He counted off five shots as he snuck around the corner, his last shot being an accidental discharge—a guard's bullet had barely missed him, causing a fragment from the wall to explode next to his face and his finger to twitch (he was grateful that the discharge occurred while his gun had been aiming away from his body).

Sounds echoed down the hallway as the two groups exchanged gunfire, neither side seeming to advance. Theodore struck another guard, feeling perverse satisfaction upon seeing the red streak form on the wall as the man slowly slumped to the floor.

Nine, he counted off.

He would need to grab a weapon from a fallen guard soon, but it was risky as he would be taking on an unknown entity—how many bullets would be left in the gun? Was it sighted properly? What happens if it jams? Countless other factors would be at play.

Until his gun was completely empty, the assassin would remain loyal to his own weapon. He couldn't see from here where his first or second magazine had fallen moments ago, either, so he couldn't pick them up to verify.

No matter. Move forward.

Another guard turned and raced for the exit, heading back towards the rear entrance from where Kim's entourage had arrived just a minute ago. Theodore took advantage of the opportunity before him. He aimed at the back of the running man; however, before he could fire, he caught something in his peripheral vision—the second guard, a woman with short blonde hair, exited from her cover and was taking aim at Theodore.

Theodore wasn't sure if the first guard was being used as a sacrificial decoy, or if the second guard was merely capitalizing on the situation, but he decided to turn his sights on the immediate

threat and aimed at the woman.

Both fired a single shot. She missed. He did not.

Mist appeared from the woman's head, her body falling lifelessly to the ground. Not letting himself be distracted by the sight, Theodore returned his aim towards the escaping guard, firing off a single shot before the man could cross the doorway's threshold. The shot wounded the guard, who stumbled forward, crimson blood splattering the wall. *Eleven.*

Theodore prowled forward, clearing the hall, making sure to check each corner. He scanned every room and door he passed—just in case. His left leg still burned and he began to feel himself limping, but the assassin forged on. His adrenaline would carry him for now—he just needed to reach the trauma kit he'd stored in the delivery van.

Once I get this bastard, Theodore thought to himself, *I'll grab his gun, patch myself up, and get the hell out of here.* He had mixed emotions, knowing Alan Kim had escaped. Theodore had been so close. It didn't seem fair to the man. Countless days of planning—wasted.

Theodore needed to earn his right to die… specifically, by taking down the king. Not to die randomly by one of his subordinates. Otherwise, what was the point of all this? Nothing would change.

Turning around the last door, the assassin scanned the garage. As far as he could see, there were three parked SUVs, countless cans and boxes, and a single guard crawling on the floor with a pool of blood trailing behind him. Theodore did not hesitate. He fired. The guard's body slumped over, apparently dead or in shock. Sighing at the violence, Theodore shook his head before limping towards the body, now searching for the dead guard's pistol to retrieve.

Theodore R. Hudson had been in countless dangerous situations before, but this was easily his worst. A dozen against one? Absurd! A bleeding thigh and ringing ears were the beginning of his

troubles—he was going to be down for weeks, perhaps even months, to recover at his age.

And worst of all, despite his success, he was now in the worst place he could be: his target had escaped, his blood and prints were all over the place, and he was now alone and injured.

Santiago would find him eventually.

He needed to escape before Alan Kim could rally his reinforcements and hunt him down. He had moments to spare.

...

Alan Kim was having the time of his life.

At first the unexpected gunfire had terrified the man—the sounds of a dozen firearms going off indoors had been deafening—yet he now felt an adrenaline surge like he'd never experienced before. It was intoxicating.

His lead bodyguard, Zoey, had tried to convince him to escape. But Alan knew that he had to deal with this troublemaker personally. The invader was in his home. Destroying his house. Hurting his people. This was personal.

He would not go out like Jade Devine—crawling to safety and dying on the floor. *No,* Alan decided that as Chief Operating Officer of Santiago, the man was obligated to control the situation personally.

Tyler would not appreciate a cowardly COO. He straightened his tie.

Besides, Alan was not completely without common sense, he'd let Zoey escort him back down the hall and into his bulletproof SUV. Alan then watched in fascination as Zoey keyed open a hidden compartment and unlocked a small armory, his eyes transfixed on the guns. It's been so long since he got to play. How joyous.

As the shootout continued, Alan also realized he was hearing a pattern. *That's strange,* he

thought to himself. Had he heard that correctly? He always had a knack for spotting differences, but…

Perhaps his mind was playing tricks on him, but he swore he could tell the difference between the weapons involved. The intruder's gun sounded noticeably different from his own team's. Time had passed, bullets flew, and Alan Kim noticed the pattern again.

Well, well, well, he smiled to himself in satisfaction.

…

Fate is a funny thing. For Theodore R. Hudson, who had taken advantage of his enemies' deafness just seconds ago, was now unable to hear the footsteps of someone else approaching him from behind. Before Theodore could reach down to the body of the guard and secure the new gun, a voice spoke out to him.

"Twelve, right?"

Theodore froze, momentarily unsure if he actually heard that. Now his bleeding leg, sore back, ringing ears, and headache were all distant memories.

Ah, fuck…

The voice returned. "At least that's how many I counted." The voice sounded… humble? Amused? Playful?

Tired and resigned to his fate, Theodore turned his head in the direction of the voice. Before the assassin stood Santiago's Chief Operating Officer—Mr. Alan Kim, armed with a shotgun and pointing straight towards him. The executive sported a massive smile on his face, one of pure joy, as his shotgun was ready to fire.

Theodore was unable to muster up the strength to reply. His breathing was labored from all the exertion, blood loss, and fading adrenaline.

Twelve, he confirmed privately to himself. *How strange. There is no way he could reasonably count something like that, and yet he got the right answer. Are you really that special, Mr. Kim?* The assassin kept thinking.

"You know, I am surprised," Alan Kim started, "one man taking down both of my teams? I almost want to hire you." Alan smiled.

Theodore shook his head. "I thought you had escaped by now."

Kim shrugged. "They wanted me to," he admitted. His eyes looked around, staring at his fallen team. He appeared legitimately upset about this. "But once we realized it was just one man, I had the team move in." The executive nodded towards a nearby SUV. "I stayed in the car, of course, ready to move. But…"

Theodore's eyes glanced down at the shotgun pointing at him. Groaning, the assassin slowly turned his body to face the executive. He had no cover. And against a shotgun at this distance? It was all over. He knew he'd lost. Alan Kim wouldn't even need to aim.

He hasn't told me to drop my weapon yet, though… or shot me.

"Did you piss yourself?" Alan Kim inquired unexpectedly and with a sense of amusement upon seeing Theodore's leg.

"Possibly," Theodore admitted. He knew his thigh was bleeding, yet after all the commotion, he wasn't sure if *all* the liquid he felt was blood. A boyish grin snuck onto Theodore's face. "I wanted to make myself at home, you know?"

"So," the executive's amusement drained from his face. "It *was* twelve, right?" Mr. Kim's eyes glanced towards Theodore's gun, which was still hanging by his side. Mr. Kim seemed like the kind of man who would enjoy toying with his prey before killing it.

"You could have miscounted." Theodore smirked, denying Mr. Kim the satisfaction of knowing

he was right. He had nothing else to lose now, so he might as well enjoy his final moments of life. It was, in fact, a twelve-round magazine. *Although…*

"Ah, but I watch and listen." Kim continued to stare at Theodore's pistol. "And that's a compact. Looks slightly modified. Twelve round capacity, extended mag?"

The assassin looked down at his gun, his body still slightly slumped over in resignation. "Yeah," he finally admitted. "It's a twelve-capacity mag." He looked back up. "Yours?"

A grin appeared on the executive's face, his ego stroked. "Well," he admitted. "I don't know. I just grabbed it from the back." He tilted his head. "But I have been around long enough to know what an extended 9mm looks like when I see one. By the way, you reached twelve before reloading last time, too. That's enough data for a trendline, you know."

A trendline? Even now the executive was engaging in business terms. Theodore's disappointment with the situation must have been evident. His eyes darted around in futility, searching for options. Kim seemingly savored the moment, letting the assassin fidget. Theodore's eyes then returned to Kim's shotgun, staring at it.

"So, what now?" Theodore questioned, his blue eyes moving back to hold Kim's brown ones. "You going to hang that shotgun up on some wall after killing me? Like a prized trophy?"

"Oh, no," the executive countered. "I'll hang *something* up from you as the trophy instead." Alan Kim smiled and enjoyed the thought. "But this?" He glanced down at his shotgun, apparently reveling at the feeling of its power in his hands. His eyes were scanning the gun intensely. "I think I'll keep this for my—"

Pop.

…

Alan Kim collapsed, his shotgun firing a single round wildly as he fell. His eyes went wide, his

mouth felt strange, and his body reacted oddly. He saw Theodore dive out of the way of the blast. Then the executive found himself lying on the ground in a pool of growing blood, his head now facing the tires of his one-time getaway vehicle.

Theodore's boots slowly appeared in his vision, limping towards Alan's face. Theodore's left foot stepped on the executive's hand to pin him down and prevent him from reaching for his shotgun.

"Lucky number thirteen," Theodore spoke softly. "Always count the one chambered." The assassin appeared grateful the executive had not considered how magazines only hold *extra* bullets.

Kim continued to stare at Theodore's boots, gurgling. He finally realized he had been shot in the neck. The sensation was strange to the man. Everything was so sticky and warm. He tasted iron. He strangely didn't even feel much pain, although he was finding it difficult to get enough air. A crimson crown curled around his neck, outlining his body amongst the blood.

"You know," Theodore remarked, reaching down and prying the shotgun from Kim's hand. "I think I'll give this a try." The assassin looked at the executive's wrist for a moment.

"Oh… and nice watch."

Alan Kim used the last of his strength to look up at Theodore, his vision going dark. He watched as Theodore inspected the shotgun with interest, toying with the safety, before finally pointing it down at his head.

Theodore stopped, took a few steps back, and aimed again.

Bang.

CHAPTER 14 — SHARK

TYLER BROODED WHILE SITTING in his leather chair.

He was deep in thought, ignoring the local news that played on the screen behind him. It was becoming dark outside—a gray overcast sky developed in the distance from where the smoke of Mercer Island could be seen from his viewpoint.

The only flickers of light from within his room emanated from his screen, displaying his emergency alert in black and white. The sound of raindrops could be heard settling on the massive windows.

His evergreen eyes glimmered while his mind calculated, his lightly tanned skin reflecting the light that glowed off his display. His office overlooked the Seattle skyline and the Puget Sound. Everything in the air, land, and sea was his.

So that's how it's going to be?

Two billionaires are dead. Inside corporate gun-free zones? Inside one of MY states? And one of MY friends?

Tyler's lip slightly twitched as new questions entered his mind. What was happening? Who the hell was killing all these people? Who dared to go after the king?

Who dares to go after Tyler fucking Santiago?

And whatever the hell happened to the rules? Weren't there rules in place to protect against this sort of thing? Could this have been NITO finally making a move against him? But this was all too sloppy and indirect. Tyler didn't know the answer.

There was supposed to be peace between the players. They all had their pieces and their allotted zones of control. Tyler had won the game by playing it fairly, so anyone who dared to change the game —*his game*—was now a threat.

I didn't start this, thought Tyler fucking Santiago. *But I will finish it.*

He reached across his desk and pressed a button, alerting his office to bring in the next assistant. One of the doors from the matching giant sequoia entrance swung open, illuminating Tyler's office with a holy beam of light—the outside world making its presence known. Tyler smiled.

"Yes, Mr. Santiago?" the assistant inquired.

"Tell every government official we know to stay the fuck away from Alan Kim's residence until we figure out what's happening."

"Yes, Mr. Santiago."

"And put out a 'catch and kill' on anyone who tries to report this before tomorrow morning."

"Yes, Mr. Santiago."

Waving his hand, Tyler dismissed the assistant, who closed the door unceremoniously behind them. Tyler didn't care about formalities—he just wanted the game maintained. His game. Because if he could maintain the game then he could control it.

How is this connected? He processed this thought for a while. *No, that's incorrect.* Why *is this connected? That's the better question.*

The man didn't care *how* the attack happened, just *why* it happened. He could change his defensive strategies to counter his opponent's methods later. But for now, why was there a new player on the board? Where did they come from and what were their motivations? He stared down at the golden turtle sculpture on his desk.

Tyler's hand glided across his desk, heading towards the button. Another assistant.

"Yes, Mr. Santiago?" this assistant asked.

"Assemble all the fixers. I want them in here by tomorrow morning. Tell them that all contingencies are on the board."

“Yes, Mr. Santiago.”

“And get me a task force to investigate Alan Kim’s murder.”

“Yes, Mr. Santiago.”

“No, wait.” Tyler stared out the window into the sky for a moment, considering another path. “Increase it to three teams on Kim’s murder.”

“Yes, Mr. Santiago.”

A hand in a black suit with a golden tie waved the assistant away, allowing the sequoia door to close behind them with a deep and solemn *thud*.

Alone again, Tyler returned to his thoughts. He missed having the company of competent conversationalists. He missed his friend Alan.

Why wait for a third strike?

Tyler found himself suddenly sitting up straight, aware of a new option before him. His hand summoned another assistant.

“Yes, Mr. Santiago?”

“Tell that son of a bitch in the Oval Office to get off their ass and make a distraction. Have them invoke some dumbass new policy, like a…”

Tyler’s face scrunched up for a moment as he tried to envision the different possibilities before translating his thoughts between Spanish and English. “Return to work program. No sé, mierda.”

“Yes, Mr. Santiago.”

Bien, we can release a statement later agreeing with the government’s decision and vow to bring in “all our workers.” It will provide us cover for the full-scale activation.

Más vale maña que fuerza. Brains are better than brawn.

“Oh, and tell the Justice Department to leash their dogs for the next few weeks. And get me in

contact with our international teams."

"Yes, Mr. Santiago."

...

The next morning created a frenzy at the office. The amount of employees physically present was both overwhelming and comically unnecessary.

Yet as fast as all these new employees arrived, they began to disappear. Witnesses would claim the new employees got into their cars and drove to branch offices, while others would say they'd quit.

But Tyler fucking Santiago, with a joint in hand, laid back in his chair and stared at the rising sun. A golden glow reigned over the Seattle skyline, creating beauty beyond description. Tyler rested, for he knew the truth—the past, the present, and the future—as his team of "fixers" were already departing for their assignments.

All contingencies were entertained.

All options were approved.

And I am the law.

CHAPTER 15 — PIRANHA

LOURINA SAT IN HER BED and tried to reread the email from her brother again for the umpteenth time. Every time she read his email her mind would simply go blank.

Her family *really* wanted to see her again, or so they claimed. They said she had been away for too long, that they missed her, and dad especially wanted to know why he rarely saw his “hija” anymore. After all, she only lived a few hours away.

Lourina was conflicted. After starting her new job with Alan Kim, Yakima would be hours away from Mercer Island. She couldn't leave without letting Kim know—just in case he demanded another emergency trip with her, like what happened with Jade Devine.

She also realized how little she stayed in her apartment anymore. The majority of the time she would sit in her office or walk around on a case. But now she had an entire year of rent paid off—for both her office and her apartment. She also had a new boss, and no new clients. Everything was going well—except on a personal level, unfortunately, with Brandi’s becoming the latest failure.

Otherwise, Lourina’s life was simple. The only difficulty she had remaining was learning the names of her fish, and she felt frustrated as to why she struggled with something so simple. *Maybe I just don’t* want *to learn their names?* She was puzzled by this stray thought.

Feeling bored, restless, and agitated, Lourina pulled herself from her bed and grabbed her keys. She decided it was time to get some fresh air, to trade her apartment for her office. It was only a fifteen-minute walk or so anyway, and the exercise would do her well.

Along the way, Lourina came across some of her contacts—those who passed along information from the streets. There wasn’t much news these days for her. Though she did find out that some of her other contacts had joined Santiago and escaped their poverty. She took a mental

note to find them some day and say congratulations.

Entering her office, Lourina conducted her routine for opening the business. She then walked past the fish tank and said hello to Alex, as was customary for her. And after looking around the office, Lourina confirmed there was absolutely not a fucking thing to do.

No open case files, no new clients, nothing but the sound of fish enjoying their lives from within a tank of water. At this brief revelation, Lourina determined that today would finally be the day that she learned their names.

No time like the present, I suppose. Let's do this.

Retrieving the biology textbook she had been gifted by Oliver's mother, Lourina searched the page that held her bookmark, on it the words "HASEMANIA NANA" stared back at her. Lourina did not know how to pronounce these words, but she did know what they stood for: The Silvertip Tetra.

Brad.

Andddd, already her mind started to feel blank. *Fuck.* No matter how many times she tried to learn the names, the words were intangible to her. They drifted on the page and became modern hieroglyphs. Lourina forced herself to concentrate and make the words become understandable once again.

Okay, okay. Focus, she scolded herself. *Start from the top and work your way down. Abstract to specific—then back.* She took a deep breath and read aloud to herself.

"Tetra is the common name for small freshwater characiform fishes that come from…" Lourina hoped that reading out loud while studying would ground her mind and body, establishing a stronger connection and understanding of the information that lay before her. *Wait,* she asked herself. W*hat the hell are "characiformes" exactly?*

Lourina flipped to the back of the textbook to find the appendix, searching for any references to “characiformes.” Finding one on page 802, Lourina flipped to find her next target. Starting to read, she—

Ding!

An alert from her phone went off. Lourina ignored it.

While she rarely received alerts from her phone anymore, she knew it must have been about Alan Kim. He was the only person she had enabled alerts for anymore. This way should a news article come out about her boss she could quickly gather the information and remain up to date with his latest political dealings.

While her phone constantly dinged after their little helicopter stunt, the past few days had been otherwise quiet. Though she did get the occasional ding—maybe two or three times a day due to reposts, such as this.

The news about the helicopter event had apparently caused all sorts of drama, just like Kim had wanted. And Lourina spent days reading the online comments with glee, especially those who wrote about him walking around with his “arm candy.” She saved those comments for her own personal ego and memories.

Although a few people had, shall we say, interesting views or insinuations about Lourina’s presence with the billionaire, she learned to ignore these comments. Instead, she smiled while reading their jealousy, for she knew that Mr. Kim had been nothing but a gentleman to her. The differences between public and private lives were ever so fascinating to the private investigator.

Focusing back on her textbook, Lourina spoke aloud while reading to combine her mind and body. “Characiformes are an order of ray-finned fish with over two thousand different species, including the common aquatic pets known as tetras and the infamous—”

Ding! Ding!

Her phone went off again in quick succession. Lourina gave her phone the slightest glance, almost like a snarl. From her distance, she did not see any message icons—only those of local news stations, including FOMO. *Not missed messages, just news.* She sighed loudly to herself and felt frustrated by the interruptions. *OKAY,* she sharply informed her mind. *Let's try this again!*

"Characiformes… aquatic pets… where was I? Ah," she found the spot. "Known as tetras and the infamous—"

Now her phone went nuclear. The dings started to go crazy. They wouldn't stop. It was as if the media had gone exponential and hit criticality. Whatever had happened, the world needed to know.

Mr. Kim must have done another media related stunt, thought Lourina. It appeared that every newswire enjoyed relaying information about her boss. Lourina reached over to pick up her phone, giving in to her distractions. She flipped the switch to silence the dings and allowed herself a moment to rest. *A quick check and then back to work*, she promised herself…

ALAN KIM, SANTIAGO CHIEF OPERATING OFFICER, DEAD AT…

What? Lourina froze. Her eyes did not move, her brain playing catch-up with this information. *This must be wrong. I was just there and…*

… FIRE… COMPLEX… MULTIPLE STAFF DEAD…

Her heart sank, her legs began to feel weak. The phone in her hand suddenly weighed ten times its weight, crushing her hand. She dropped it.

This must be a mistake, she determined. *Maybe an accidental misprint about Jade Devine? Somehow getting my bosses' name mixed up?*

Hesitantly, Lourina picked up her phone and opened the first news article she could find with a mixture of dread and hope. She read on. It was true, at least according to the news. Alan Kim's complex on Mercer Island had gone up in flames "yesterday."

But Lourina had just talked to him days ago. He was alive. And how could there have been a fire? His home appeared to have state-of-the-art security and safety systems when she had visited, including fire suppression. And there were all those guards.

Am I dreaming? She looked around her office, hoping to spot something that seemed off, something that could prove to her that she was asleep. But the only thing she saw was one of her fish—Brad—staring back at her.

Years of her life had gone into the planning for this moment. To move away from Yakima, to graduate from college, to become a police officer, detective, and later a private investigator. She had finally gotten it all. And now her world was falling apart. Just moments ago her life was perfect. And now her new boss, and future paychecks, were gone. *But why? How? What does this all mean?*

Lourina lost her ability to think. Her mind wandered, her body on autopilot. Her phone lay on her desk while her eyes just kept looking—scanning—for anything that could make sense right now. Something to distract her. Something to prove this was all fake. Something to wake her up from the nightmare. *Could I have fallen asleep on my bed reading emails again?*

Her head lowered and her eyes lost focus. She tried to retake control of her emotions and of the situation. She began to force herself to take deep breaths and concentrate, making small victories. But while she breathed deeply, her eyes kept feeling pulled towards something. She couldn't figure

out what, so she stopped resisting and let them wander. They returned to the sentence she had been reading just moments ago:

"...including the common aquatic pets known as tetras and the infamous piranha."

Lourina stared at the sentence, tears watering in her eyes and the word burning into her mind.

Piranha.

CHAPTER 16 — BLOOD

SHE RARELY SPED but today was different. Lourina refused to believe what was happening. The sun was still rising and the lights from Mercer Island flickered in the distance—the same as they always do. *Looks normal… and I don't see any smoke.*

She couldn't see any fire, nor any flashing emergency lights. No police, no fire department, no news crews—nothing. This must be proof that those articles were wrong. If Alan Kim's complex had gone up in flames then the entire island would be awake right now with activity. But there was nothing out of the ordinary. She drove on, ignoring the warning signs for slow speeds and gun-free zones, determined to find the truth.

Approaching the security checkpoint, Lourina gasped. The residence was burnt to the ground. Gone. Just like what had happened at Jade Devine's complex earlier this month.

How is this possible? Her breathing went out of sync, the ability for her to gather oxygen becoming difficult. Her lungs constricted.

Anxiety? She pulled over, forcing herself to relax. *This doesn't make any sense! None of this!*

Lourina's hands trembled, barely able to maintain her grip on the steering wheel. Down the road, the complex security gate remained closed. After shifting gears to park her car, the private investigator took a moment to scream in her car. No one was nearby to hear or notice.

Collecting herself, Lourina slowly exited her graying car and walked towards the complex. The reddish hue of the dawning light cast a morbid background upon the destroyed complex. And upon closer inspection, Lourina noticed countless roaming security guards probing through the debris. They appeared to be Santiago teams, but she didn't know any of them. Were these people Alan Kim's reserves? Or some form of crisis response team from Santiago himself?

And where were the fire crews? Or the police? Or the investigators? The complex was no

longer on fire—thankfully—so there must have been firefighters earlier. Yet it seemed as though someone had wiped away all the evidence of other service's involvement. This was completely out of the usual, against everything Lourina was trained in or had seen—even at Jade Devine's complex. Once again, life threw a curve ball at Lourina, and nothing made sense to her anymore.

Her fingertips brushed the front gate, feeling the cold metallic surface as it siphoned away the heat from her body. Her nostrils flared and smelled nothing but faint smoke and the seaside air.

She called out to the security guards who were now blocking her way. But no amount of explanations would sway them, even after telling them she worked for Alan Kim. They still wouldn't let her through. They didn't know her, or so they claimed. And when she insisted, one guard relented and looked up some records on his phone. Searching, he shook his head.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I can't find you in our records anywhere."

Shit, Lourina realized. *Because I worked for Mr. Kim and not for Santiago.* Upon trying to explain her situation, Lourina was surprised at how sympathetic both guards became. Strangely they appeared to understand her situation. But they also had orders not to let anyone else in. Lourina then tried to name-drop Kim's bodyguard, Zoey, as a reference. No luck.

Lourina finally gave up. She decided to walk again, to move and clear her head just as before. *Every time I come to this fucking place,* she stewed, *my life gets shaken upside down*. Her mind kept flashing between words—memories and abstract ideas that were colliding together into strange combinations. She couldn't figure out why but the word "piranha" wouldn't leave her mind. *Why piranha?*

To her left, Lourina noticed something odd from across the street. *Is that…?* She gasped, another unexpected twist from today. *That's the FBI agent, Special Agent… Zenith?*

Across the street—and out of the way—stood two federal agents, sipping hot drinks, one

leaning against their low-profile government vehicle. Senior Special Agent Zenith, standing, nodded to Lourina after their eyes made contact. With nothing else to do, Lourina walked towards them. She took a direct route, not realizing she had crossed the street without looking both ways. Luckily there were no vehicles driving along this haunted road.

"I'm sorry for your loss," Special Agent Zenith said before Lourina could say anything. The words sounded kind yet hollow. Like they were back at Jade's complex. Lourina couldn't find anything to say in return. Instead, she simply nodded her head in gratitude.

Her mind was fractured. She didn't know what was "right" anymore, so she spoke openly and honestly to the woman standing before her. "Why are you here?" Lourina inquired.

The FBI agents looked at each other for a moment, their message socially encrypted.

"Officially, we're not," the partner of Special Agent Zenith chimed in—another woman—who did not offer her name.

"What do you mean?" Lourina was determined to dig.

Zenith shrugged. "We were still investigating Mrs. Devine's murder and providing support for the local authorities when we heard the call about Alan Kim. Initially we were told to visit, but then our SAC—sorry, our boss—told us to turn around and stay away."

Lourina frowned. "Stay away?"

"We don't know why," admitted Zenith. "This is fairly unusual."

"Hang on," Lourina cut her off. "Speaking of unusual, why are *you* here?" *And why are you telling me all this?*

"I'm sorry?" The slightest hint of her accent slipped through.

"I mean," Lourina warmed herself up. "How are you both working cases across all these boundaries? I don't know much about the FBI, but aren't there residencies? Isn't Lake Chelan

overseen by Yakima?" Lourina casually pointed to the surrounding scene. "This is Mercer Island—this investigation should be overseen by your Seattle team, right? As long as the local authority requests it. Unless, of course, you have a reason for jurisdiction?"

The two agents smirked, first at Lourina, then at each other. Zenith nodded to Lourina. "Well done, Ms. Sanches. No wonder why you made detective at your department so quickly."

Lourina stared at Zenith. *I never told her I was a former detective. In fact, we barely said anything at all.*

Agent Zenith must have telepathy too—or simply pieced together the face Lourina gave her. "Obviously we ran your info after we met. Wanted to verify. Nice try with that whole escort-cover-thing, by the way."

Lourina scoffed in annoyance. *Of course you did, fed.*

"And as for your question," Zenith clarified, "we work out of the Seattle field office, actually. When Devine was murdered, her husband—Micheal—pulled some strings with our SAC to get some oversight. It's not our case, but we're supporting. Apparently they were golfing buddies and go way back. And we were sent to placate him."

"And now," her partner joined in, adding to the complexity. "We're on a 'break,' merely traveling through Mercer Island while on our way back to the office."

Zenith nodded. "Yup. Once we heard about the method of death, we were too curious to ignore the situation. But since we can't officially be here…" she let her sentence drag in the air, allowing Lourina to put together some of the pieces.

Well now, sneaky-sneaky. But again: why are you letting me know this?

"So why did your superiors want you to investigate Jade's murder, but not Alan's?" Lourina verbalized instead.

“We don’t know. Someone up high—real damn high—called everything off.” Zenith used her right hand to indicate where former objects had been located around the street. “As soon as the fire was put out, everyone just disappeared.” Her hands now mimicked a magician, vanishing an item and amazing the crowd. “As if a whisper into their ears had told them all to go away.”

Lourina looked back at the crime scene. “So… what does it all mean?”

“It’s a coverup.”

“What?” Lourina whipped back around and faced the FBI agents.

“The fire didn’t kill Kim. There was a shootout. The fire was simply a means to cover up the killing.”

The partner chimed back in again. “I’m betting it was Santiago.”

Lourina stared at the woman for a moment in shock. “Why?”

“Because who else could murder Alan Kim?” the partner began to gesture and make a wide circle—indicating a large support network—“along with eleven of his bodyguards like that? And have all the evidence disappear?” She motioned her head towards the Santiago crews rummaging through the destroyed complex… and then towards a Santiago cleaning crew working off the street.

Special Agent Zenith took a sip of her drink. “Mmm,” she replied to her partner. “Perhaps.” Was there some disagreement between these agents? Or were they fishing for a response from their catch?

FBI agents speaking openly about an active investigation meant bad things to Lourina. Social order was breaking down at higher levels than she expected. She was trying to put everything together. “Could this be the same murderer as Jade Devine?”

“Doubtful,” Zenith countered. “Devine was killed by a drone.”

Lourina's day just kept getting worse. Her voice rose. "What?!"

Zenith shook her head. "Hell of a case," she started off. "We found evidence that a drone was involved to start the fire—some odd air traffic noticed by the FAA, disturbed ground at key points overlooking the complex, so on."

"As for the drone, it most likely carried a drip torch. There were no footprints or other evidence that anyone was physically present on the ground where the fire had started."

"We later found the drone, wiped and cleaned, after it had been donated to a nearby school, minus the device used for the fire. But as far as where the operator is now?" Zenith looked up into the sky. "Who knows?"

A drone? Lourina bit her lower lip in contemplation. *Like when Mr. Kim used a drone to follow me?* She didn't offer this information to the two federal agents standing before her. *And… it was donated? Why? Who would donate a murder weapon? Unless they were sure of themselves…*

"How did you ever get involved with Alan Kim, anyway?" the partner—who Lourina now realized still hadn't introduced herself—looked curiously, her eyes scanning Lourina and taking notes. While this woman's voice sounded innocent, her words were venomous.

If Lourina did nothing crazy, there was no risk of her getting bit. Still, Lourina somehow felt violated again. However, she had become used to these sorts of interactions during her short career in law enforcement. It was basically an annoying tick by this point.

"I was contracted to find his son, David. He went missing."

Both agents were now frowning at Lourina. Zenith's stare turned into the same venomous look that her partner wore. "Is that what the guards told you?" Zenith probed.

"And when did you find out?" the partner decided to tag along.

Lourina's brow furrowed. "What are you two talking about?" *I'm feeling surrounded… do they*

actually suspect I had something to do with this?

"About David going missing," Zenith clarified.

"No," Lourina shook her head. "I already found him. Back in Ocean Shores—this was a few weeks ago. We never made a missing person's report."

The two agents exchanged another socially encrypted glance. After a quick back-and-forth being performed silently—with each questioning and answering the other by the looks on their face—Zenith's partner gave up and finally verbalized the conversion with frustration. "She doesn't *know*."

"Know what?" Lourina pressed, strangely bothered by the comment and the game being played by the two odd agents.

Zenith sighed, momentarily looking uncomfortable. "David is missing." Zenith glanced back at Lourina. "... uh, again."

"How do you know that?" Lourina pressed. "Did someone file a report?"

"We overheard Santiago's comms chatter." Zenith gestured towards the nearby guards. There were occasional squawks overheard by their radios, the acoustics traveling up the road and providing both agents with the ability to listen in—like an amphitheater. "They're all looking for David, but he's gone. He wasn't found in the complex nor anywhere else."

David? Lourina couldn't handle all of this information at once. Her day kept getting weirder. Her mind was fragmenting; her identity fading away. Nothing made sense anymore.

Why would Tyler Santiago kill Alan Kim? And why by such a manner? If you are the boss, why not simply order your subordinate to join you on some business trip and make him have, I don't know, an "accident"? What's the point of killing his security detail? And why the fire? Or the after show?

Especially the fire, considering that Jade Devine had died by fire—and Alan Kim had been clearly and openly gathering information about Jade's death. What would be the point of all this? Did Alan learn something he shouldn't? Was he dragged into this somehow?

It didn't make any sense. The only thing Lourina knew was that someone, or something, was clearing out billionaires, eating them up like a swarm of locusts. *Or a school of piranhas?*

Lourina's world view had been shaken countless times this month. Everything had changed since that corporate man with the black folder and the golden "S" walked through her doors. She wanted to tell these agents everything she knew but she couldn't find it within herself to talk anymore. *Who can I trust anymore?*

Her head was pounding and her body was starting to crash from the adrenaline. Lourina just wanted to go back to her apartment. She wanted to rest.

Thanking the agents for their time, PI Sanches exchanged business cards with Zenith before heading back to her car. She wanted for this day to be over—for this *dream* to be over. And for tonight, she decided she would finish off that bottle Alan Kim had gifted her.

She'd pour a toast to her boss. *Former boss?*

She also needed time to process what the hell was going on with the FBI and whether she needed legal counsel. These agents knew Lourina wasn't officially part of Santiago and yet they seem to have extended all the usual courtesies to her. As if they respected her.

Was Lourina a suspect or not? What game are they playing? Are they part of the cover up and lying to her? What do they actually know? And why are they telling these dangerous things to her?

Lourina concentrated on what she could control.

I didn't really know you, Alan, she thought privately as she drove home. Her mouth was unable to open and verbalize her thoughts anymore. *But I hope you are now at peace. And I will use*

everything in my power to find these fucking monsters. Her heart started to beat faster as her grip tightened upon the wheel.

Even if it kills me.

CHAPTER 17 — RECOVERY

BEING PARANOID IN THIS INDUSTRY is a requirement to reach retirement age.

After all, why would you risk believing your lying eyes? You may have two of them—but you only have one life! Your eyes could be mistaken. Therefore, to Theodore, this job required certain skills, abilities, and some might even say "quirks" to survive.

Refreshing his email again, Theodore mentally ignored his previous conversations. He had heard back from some of his old pals. Some had been laid off while others heard whispers of new offers. But that was old news; Theodore wanted to keep alert.

And with Theodore nursing his injured left leg, courtesy of his last kill, he had been bedridden for three weeks now. A bullet had indeed struck him during his shootout with Alan Kim's team; however, the resulting wound was later found to be a graze—a ricochet. Theodore believed himself fortunate upon this discovery, although it was still a deep wound, and made for a lot of blood to clean up.

Theodore's chest, previously full of anger, tried to coexist with his rediscovered fear of mortality. He needed to live long enough to earn his right to die. And today, while lying in bed to recover, Theodore's insistence on checking his email finally provided him with something unexpected.

An email… from Santiago.

A Santiago associate, to be specific. And the email only appeared to contain a single link, offering to redirect the user to the place Theodore preferred to avoid during his career. He began to feel frozen in time, confused as to what was happening before his eyes. *Did they track me through the laptop? I thought NITO tech prevented that…*

Theodore's encrypted laptop had been purchased from "NITO" years ago—he didn't

remember exactly what it stood for, something about “novel innovations” and being a “trust organization”—a global company that quietly bridged the moralities of society. Through secure forms of communication, corporate assassins were given lucrative contracts from within classified cell networks planted deep within NITO. This way the majority of NITO’s own employees would have no idea what their organization was doing, thereby increasingly deniability.

NITO was supposed to be a neutral zone, the place where contracts are plentiful but the questions are few. Yet Theodore didn’t trust this Santiago hyperlink. Instead, he logged into the main page through his own browser, seeing what was being offered through the latest industry codewords. He found himself puzzled by how corporate and innocent sounding NITO’s website tried to be. *Do they really think people believe their lies?*

Officially, NITO claims to support novel or innovative designs through privately funding the artists, scientists, explorers, and countless others across the globe who pursued these endeavors. These grants were supposed to benefit everyone: any research uncovered through NITO funding is required to be made available to the public. This ensured that society saw the organization as a positive, if not relatively boring, player in geopolitics.

Their corporate inner cells, meanwhile, worked separately.

The organization was rumored to hold a massive endowment, growing non-stop with the stock market over the years. All previous donors are unknown and only started after the end of World War 2.

Since then, NITO has modeled itself with a United Nations approach to corporate issues, whereby it was free and independent of most global politics. NITO was designed so that assassins got paid through mysterious grants while the corporate money remained firewalled from their deeds to prevent any legal probes. And because NITO’s income is self-sustaining, there was little

political will to probe into its business dealings. As long as the grants were appropriately taxed, governments did not care.

And if an assassin wanted the best gear possible, they went to NITO. Any assassin worth their name used NITO equipment for their backup plans. The quality was outstanding. Superb. Unmatched. All designed to keep the dark from the light.

This stuff was off-the-market. Only a dozen countries and their respective intelligence communities could rival NITO equipment, and they were too busy playing with each other to care about NITO. *As long as NITO stayed out of their politics, of course*.

As for Theodore, he distrusted NITO.

He preferred networking the old-fashioned way. Besides, most of the contracts were for some strange, odd jobs far away from society. NITO dealt more with local whistleblowers and unionists than anything else.

And now that Theodore received an email from Santiago, his inner alarm started to scream at him to bail out, escape, get out now! *Move*, he scolded himself. *They know*!

But his body refused to move. He felt as though he was a prisoner in his own skin. *Why am I not moving?*

None of this made sense to Theodore. His legs wouldn't budge—almost as if his laptop was restraining him. His body sensed danger, yet his ears, eyes, and nose detected nothing. His mind was screaming at him—but for what? He didn't know. For the first time in his life, Theodore experienced being a deer who had wandered into oncoming lights. He froze.

Why? That was the only question he could formulate. Theodore took his time to concentrate and ground himself, refusing to give in to his emotions. After a few deep breaths, he found himself regaining his clarity. *Are they toying with me?*

This thought bemused Theodore for a moment. Did they put him on NITO's list, wanting him to *know* he was dead? Was the kill delayed until he opened the link, as some sort of sick confirmation by Santiago? *Or am I simply overthinking all of this?*

Forcing another deep breath, Theodore was determined to confront his fears. Besides, his leg was injured, so why should he move unless he was sure? Also, moving might trigger the trap before he could think about how to escape.

Sticking to the official website, Theodore manually typed the remainder of the hyperlink into his browser out of curiosity. The screen redirected him, showing an internal NITO website that was announcing "grants" and other "awards" for specific "contracts." And after a few minutes of reading the page, Theodore felt himself exhale in relief. *Nothing active in Washington State. I might be safe.*

The page was full of codenames, of course, but none of them (once interpreted) were for him. It was a fiesta, an all-you-can-eat buffet of contracts with each valuing in the millions of dollars. Whomever was at play was making tidal waves. Perhaps a few mergers had gone bad? Or was Santiago trying to shake things up after Alan Kim?

Theodore thought back to the era of the Auckland incident and the resulting frenzy. *Paid off my South Dakota home because of that season.*

The NITO page had been designed to look like a list of grant recipients to fool the casual viewer. Theodore noticed that while most of the contracts were valued in the millions, there was someone named "Edward, Alex W." in Ordinary, Maine for $500,000 and wanted by some random government agency. They were the only one, though. Whatever "Alex" had done to piss the government off was apparently worth half a million dollars… and unrelated to Santiago! *Sorry, bud. That sucks.*

Reaching down to his leg and tenderly nursing his wound, Theodore found himself reminiscing about the shootout. He wanted to see what he could learn for next time…

Medical kit. Fuel cans. Storage. Start a fire.

These thoughts came to Theodore in rapid succession. His mind was racing. He only had minutes before the police would triangulate the noise. There was no way someone didn't hear all of that commotion.

Even though it had taken just over a minute, that was enough time to warrant urgency. And after a quick glance at his left leg, Theodore realized that his wound was merely a graze. He could patch himself up before clearing the scene and escaping. No one else was around. Where did all the staff go?

After wrapping a bandage around his leg, Theodore opened and tossed around countless cans of fuel that were stored in the billionaire's garage. Mr. Kim must have been prepping for years—and Theodore thanked him for that.

Taking two cans of gasoline with him back into the kitchen and dining room, Theodore poured around as much fuel as he could, creating a line back to the rest of the fuel storage. He estimated it would overwhelm the suppression system.

Slowly working his way down the hallway of bodies, Theodore noticed that the lights in the last room were flickering. The previously locked door was slightly ajar—a dead female guard laid next to the frame, propping it open. Taking a decent look around inside, Theodore noticed a treasure trove of electronics: monitors, server racks, and countless cables of all sizes and colors were tied up around the room, centralizing the network into this singular hub.

Theodore smiled with delight at his discovery. He headed back to the fuel storage and grabbed another can—just for this room. Because this room needed his personal send-off, along with all of its evidence.

Finished, Theodore started to feel queasy from all the fumes in close quarters and in such high concentrations. Shaking his head to get ahold of himself, he marched to his delivery van, walking past Alan Kim's body. He realized he wouldn't have space to hide the shotgun, so he tossed the gun into the pool of fuel to be cleansed. Damned shame, it was a nice shotgun.

Everything was a mess, and who knew what evidence would be left behind, but Theodore needed to get out of here before the quick response force arrived.

He turned on the van, rolled down the window, tossed a road flare into the pool of fuel behind him and drove off. The security gate, now empty of guards, had been left open for Alan Kim to escape. Theodore would have only a minute or so to implement his emergency plan. His kayak was nearby, next to an unused private boat ramp that would allow him to rapidly access the waterways. No time to put on the wetsuit, though. Risky, but time's a wasting.

Theodore would "forget" to lock his delivery van's handbrake while leaving it in neutral on the inclined boat ramp with its doors open and windows down.

Instead, he'd rush to get to his kayak and to clear away from the island as fast as possible. It was still light out, but the pre-planned route should not have any cameras that could catch a decent view of Theodore or of the local delivery van, which was now sliding down to its dark blue watery grave.

Once Theodore felt that he was far enough away, he allowed himself to look back at the growing

smoke and watch the flashing lights appear across the water. He relaxed and enjoying the view, like any other kayaker would.

After a few moments of recollection, the wounded man sighed. He didn't care anymore about the Santiago link or any potential schemes. As far as Theodore could tell, the email was simply, well, spam! Corporate assassin spam, yes, but spam, nonetheless.

Theodore found enough inner strength to slowly lift the laptop off his lap before gently placing it down on his bed. He laid back and looked around at his fortifications from the past few weeks, smiling to himself, before returning to read his medical textbook.

In a few days—if all went well—Theodore would return to Colima Café, visit his friend Yani, and begin the next phase of his plans. But for now his mind pressed against his skull, running on full power, as he attempted to formulate everything, everywhere, all at once.

Why did Alan Kim return early? Did I leave any recoverable evidence behind? Did any random trail camera or other device capture me?

He didn't know the answers to any of these questions, but he forced himself to accept what he did know: he was still alive.

And that's all that mattered, right?

…

Did the garbage truck always arrive at 10? Theodore peeked through his window, just past where his "real" car was parked in the lot. He used his real car to travel around and gather his temporary vehicles, such as the sedan, and rarely left the car in a place where he couldn't easily explain its presence.

I thought the garbage truck came at 9.

Theodore didn't like that. He would have to add those cleaning crew schedules onto his list of things to document.

His eyes continued to scan these new Santiago "cleaning crews" that had arrived in Richland about a week ago. They were slowly spreading across the state, going everywhere and cleaning everything. But Theodore's only experience with the crews was his time monitoring them back on Mercer Island—so he wasn't sure if *these* crews were legit yet… or a setup for something more insidious.

I'm watching you, too.

His arms were heavy and his legs burned; his eyes were dry and his muscles were sore. His body was pressed against the wall, a reinforced area of the home and next to the window, holding the only rifle he owned. His pistol, normally concealed on the small of his back, was now holstered on his side hip for quick access.

The window remained closed and Theodore's body remained frozen: only his eyes moved while tracking the golden intruders.

He kept his black assault rifle at home in case of an emergency—and being surrounded by Santiago people felt like an emergency right now. He only wished he could have kept Alan Kim's shotgun, but there had been enough chaos going on to deal with at that time.

Theodore also found himself slightly struggling to breathe as his plate carriers were weighing him down—he hadn't worn full plate armor for so long. It was heavier than he remembered.

When was the last time he trained with them? He should go hiking with a pack again sometime. His age was starting to catch up with him and he needed to be smarter. And now he wondered whether it was wiser to sneak away with the vest on—or to ditch it and go incognito?

Perhaps the weather would be cold enough for him to wear a jacket and cover up his armor? Or

perhaps he could even tailor the armor so that he could quickly drop it during an escape?

Theodore desperately wanted to go outside. He craved fresh air. He wanted to clear his head. But with the recent wildfires near Mt. Tahoma, the local air quality had become hazardous. “Dangerous levels” according to the news. And with his injured leg, Theodore decided it was best to lay low and recover for the next few weeks.

Yet the weeks dragged on and Theodore was becoming cagey. He wanted to prepare himself for any possibilities—any dangers.

Around the apartment? Traps. Traps as far as you could see. Traps that were meticulously designed from years of paranoia, expertise, and boredom. These traps were slowly and subtly introduced into his apartment’s design—supposedly innocent items that could be rapidly deployed in an emergency.

Door barricades, for example. Theodore had positioned heavy furniture next to each of his doors, such as a living room chair or bedroom dresser, so that it could allow him to move the heavy objects in seconds and prop them against a door.

He also deployed nail beds under each window, previously staged after having a few random toolboxes full of long and loose nails strewn around the home as “workstations” for “pet projects” that were ready to be tossed on the floor in a moment’s notice.

Theodore had noticed his robot vacuum cleaner getting stuck with nails in its wheels—again—however, he dared not to leave his post. Not right now, at least. The robot cleaner was doing its job so that Theodore could do his.

Good robot, follow your orders. We might all make it through this.

But all these weeks of pent-up paranoia and alertness had mentally fatigued Theodore. He kept drilling details into his mind every night before bed for memorization, trying to remain sharp. The

locations of his safe houses across the country, his stash piles, and lesser-known routes to and from major cities.

No matter what, Theodore wanted to be ready.

And thus, he would remain vigilant.

CHAPTER 18 — CONSPIRACY

HER PHONE HAD BEEN REPROGRAMMED to alert her whenever a billionaire was mentioned in the news, hoping to triangulate the path of this predator. *Or swarm? Or one*?

Lourina chewed on the back of her pen for a moment and let her mind wrangle with that last thought. *It's hungry, whatever it is.* This force was going through billionaires and their security teams in a feeding frenzy. *But nothing is ever taken, nothing is ever left. Just death.*

Until Lourina could prove there were more conspirators, she defaulted to viewing her "Piranha" as a singular enemy, a single target to focus on. For now, at least.

K.I.S.S principle, remember—Keep it Simple, Sanches. She could hear one of her former academy instructors within her mind. She disliked the joke back then but appreciated the hidden nugget of wisdom now.

Nearly a dozen billionaires from all over the globe had died in the past few weeks. Lourina's case wall—once overflowing with missing victims' posters—was now a mural of dead billionaires. Links, questions, and networks were laid out over the wall, along with the ramblings of a mad woman trying to piece together something so abstract.

None of these deaths matched the earlier killings. Nothing that could help her find out what happened to Alan Kim, or why was he involved. *What does this all mean?*

In Lourina's right hand, she twisted and played mindlessly with her new business card. It was a fairly boring card—mostly white with a single-color logo. But to Lourina, the only part of the card that she cared about was the contact information within:

JASMINE A. ZENITH

Senior Special Agent

FBI Seattle Field Office

Just who is Zenith, anyway? Lourina stared at the card for a moment. *Such an uncommon last name in the Pacific Northwest.*

Lourina had spent a few days casually searching for Zenith online—not many articles came up, unsurprisingly, but one of particular interest did: an article about how federal employees in the region viewed diversity within the workforce.

For one, Zenith's family was reportedly from the Philippines—but Zenith was born in the United States before "growing up abroad" (the article offered no further clarification). She claims she felt honored to serve her government and had recently graduated with a master's in psychology before joining the FBI.

This was, of course, old news—around the time of the Auckland incident nearly a decade ago. Lourina wondered if Zenith was still that happy federal employee she appeared to be in her interview, because the one Lourina met seemed different.

What the system does to you…

Shaking her head, Lourina decided to go walk and get some fresh air. Mt. Tahoma was visible again today—beautiful as ever—even with the active wildfires on its eastern side. Fortunately nothing interrupted the view she had in the Puget Sound. Saying goodbye to Alex, Brad, Charles, and Danny, Lourina grabbed her purple hoodie from her closet and started to lock up her office.

Lourina missed these daily walks, so she was beginning to reincorporate them into her routine again, her personal celebration after becoming free. Her rent and office were paid for the year and

she had no pressing demands. For now, Lourina would give Santiago time to recover before offering them her services.

Until then she wanted to see what was happening with Piranha, as she was still fishing for her elusive catch. She needed to know why Alan Kim had died.

And who broke the peace? The voice of Alan Kim could be heard parroting in Lourina's head.

Outside her Tacoma office, the private investigator strolled down the streets aimlessly. *These new Santiago cleanup crews are doing one hell of a job.* She had to admit she was wrong—the recovery of the region was starting to look good. At least compared to a few weeks ago!

But the Santiago crews confused her. Initially they were nice and she made a few contacts, like Paul, and even got along with a few of the others, minus her strikeout with Nicole over at Brandi's.

And then one day a new crew came in. This crew ignored Lourina, dutifully sticking to their jobs without complaint. Any time Lourina tried to offer them food vouchers they would politely decline. If she asked them how their day was going they'd give a single answer back.

"Good."

Lourina began to wonder if there had been a policy change at Santiago regarding gifts. Or maybe this specific crew took their policies more seriously? But when Lourina sent a message to Paul asking about what had happened, the contractor simply replied that his team had been reassigned to a new local sector. They were, however, still close by—and that Lourina was welcome to join them tonight at the Santiago bar again.

If she wanted to, of course.

She accepted.

…

Fred enjoyed routine.

A man of simplicity, one who loved when things remained stable and boring. And after being out of a job for a few months now, Fred gladly accepted the Santiago contract without hesitation. He needed to feed his family, after all.

The contract was simple, really. In his mind, it was perfect. Admittedly, the hardest part of his job was dealing with the paperwork: filing his daily reports, multiple times a day, before the shift changes. These reports were short, boring, and trivial to make. But they took time out of his schedule, and Fred was hungry and wanted to clock off on time for dinner. After all, cleaning trash from the streets all day was physically exhausting work!

Approaching the Santiago cleaning van—pure white with a black logo and a golden S detail on the side—Fred knocked twice on the van's door. He casually glanced around in boredom, feeling slightly tired by the late evening—even though it was about to be dinner time. A few moments of silence passed before the door finally slid open. Fred thanked his Santiago coworker and hopped inside the van. He took off his orange safety jacket and headed towards his workstation.

With the door locking behind him, Fred reached over and logged into the NITO laptop using his credentials. He had already drafted his report, but he wanted to verify some things before sending it off. *Always have to be sure!*

And to Fred the report was perfect:

REPORT: 15 DEC 29

SANCHES, LOURINA NMN *STILL AT OFFICE.*

> ***CONTACTS***

>> *NEW: NONE.*

>> *OLD: SANTIAGO CHAR. CTR # 24413322.*

> ***ROUTINE***

>> *NEW: NONE.*

>> *OLD: PEARL BAR (CHARLIE TEAM).*

BRAVO TEAM: *HAND OFF* ***15M CHARLIE TEAM.***

CHARLIE TEAM*:* *HAND OFF* ***8H 15M ALPHA TEAM***

CHAPTER 19 — RESULTS

THE REPORTS SCROLLED PAST his screen and Tyler fucking Santiago smiled to himself. His teeth were red-stained, in an almost animalistic way, after having a sip of his Cabernet Sauvignon that he paired with his evening meal.

The food was delicious. *Scrumptious, even.*

His entertainment for tonight? Listening to his fixers detail, one by one, the fates of each character displayed on the screen before him. The fixers explained to Tyler what he was seeing with specific details of each execution.

Chief Executive Officer Francisco of AMORY SERVICES: "disappeared" from their family super-yacht while traveling off the coast of the Philippines.

How tragic! He shook his head mournfully.

Chief Executive Officer Martínez of KELMAR COMS: died after her car was hacked and crashed into a wall at lethal speed.

A fellow Boricua. Lo siento, mi amiga. I am sorry, my friend. Still… who trusts "auto pilot," honestly?

Chief Executive Officer Brooke of AHLAN INTERNET, (whose last name sounded like "broke" and always annoyed Tyler)**: discovered dead by "suicide" in her Moroccan complex.**

Too soon! He smiled with pleasure at that one. *She had been a real annoyance.*

Shaking his head gently, Tyler savored every thought in his head and lingering taste in his mouth. The sound of soft jazz played in the background—his ears now in harmony with the environment as the trickle of raindrops played against his tower. He knew that the news was going to have a field day with all this.

Alas, there was nothing he could do. *Well, wanted to.*

The game demanded it. It was a shame, really. Tyler had found himself enjoying the company of some of these characters. Still, they have served as excellent forms of entertainment over the years.

And now, the game master would get to watch family members fight one another over who would become the next king or queen on his board. *Some literally.*

Michael Devine? "Heart attack" during a night with an escort.

Really, Mike? So soon after your wife died, ¿cabrón?

Ms. Saeed of Saeed Medical Group? Plane crash.

Actually, that wasn't supposed to happen. Tyler shrugged, oddly amused. *This is why I fly European.*

And as for dear Mr. Gordon? Overdose.

A mercy killing, admittedly. He was losing it. And encroaching on my territory. El que la hace la paga. Whoever does the deed pays the price.

The actual number of dead billionaires was merely a fraction of their total, as the sum of their economic class had grown exponentially over the decades. But that fraction was all Tyler needed

to mark his territory. No one who comes after the king would survive. And now, dozens of dead billionaires across the globe were displayed publicly to prove his point.

He was a trillionaire. To Tyler, a billionaire was no different than a yapping dog trying to bite at his ankles. At his wealth. Nothing could stop him; he wouldn't let it. Tyler laughed at billionaires the same way how billionaires laughed at millionaires. *Pathetic.*

Still, why risk anything? Tyler had already thrown money at the problem. All available NITO assets were now under his funding. The rest of the world wouldn't need it—he was going to alter the world himself. Countless strike teams were now pouring through the records of everyone Alan Kim knew or had contact with. Tyler still needed to find out who broke the peace. *And who killed Alan.*

His hand reached out towards his trusty intercom—the next assistant entering his office. *Which assistant is this?* He could almost tell the difference by their footsteps, but he rarely verified.

"Yes, Mr. Santiago?" a woman's voice called out.

"Announce flash deals for Puerto Rico—2030's New Year's Eve in San Juan. The theme for the decade? Renewal. And announce a grant to coincide—let's say 2030 million in community investments."

"Yes, Mr. Santiago."

"Also, have the good captain sober up and start promoting the deals. And remind him that I won't tolerate him talking about NITO publicly again like last time. Keep a permanent handler on him."

"Yes, Mr. Santiago."

I wonder if I should attend the New Year's Eve event in San Juan? Maybe even stay for San Sebastián?

Tyler mulled this over for a while before making a decision. It had been quite some time, after all.

Yes, yes I should. He clapped his hands softly together in excitement, leaning forward in his chair. It had been decades since he'd returned to the island. He missed Puerto Rico. His family.

Pain radiated throughout his body. Dark thoughts and memories flooded back like a storm surge. He suddenly remembered too much. He then glanced at his calendar and contemplated the date.

But not this year. I'll go next. Let that captain go this year. Tyler continued to ponder his options before he decided on—

We are being watched.

Tyler looked back over his shoulder, realizing he had forgotten to dismiss his assistant. The woman, who appeared nervous from his sudden eye contact, remained standing in the wooden doorway.

"And," Tyler regained his composure. "Tell the White House to throw another legal carrot on the stick for the upcoming election. The usual promises: legalization typically works."

"Yes, M-Mr. Santiago." the assistant appeared confused as to what was happening; however, she also seemed relieved.

An overly exaggerated hand dismissed her, ushering her away. She closed the giant wooden door behind her and rushed past the next assistant in line who was standing alert outside the door. She had quite a few orders to relay this time and needed to move quickly before she forgot. Mr. Santiago wouldn't appreciate her forgetting.

Now then, Tyler fucking Santiago thought with delight.

Back to us.

CHAPTER 20 — SCAVENGE

"STIR-CRAZY, ADJECTIVE, SLANG. Informal, restless or frantic because of confinement, routine…"

Theodore groaned, blinking his eyes and forcing himself awake. He pressed his back against his chair, feeling his pistol once more, and sighed with relief upon its confirmation. Next to his chair stood a make-shift table that held a used dictionary along with a pair of golden reading glasses. He wore all black otherwise to be hidden.

It's been weeks, he droned on to himself. *Leg's all healed, and no one seems to be coming for me…*

Across the room—on a proper table—sat multiple checkbooks. Laid out beside them was all of Theodore's clean money, all that he could acquire right now. Well, before he lost his job. *Money's getting tight.*

Theodore didn't like that part.

Not *all* of his money, of course. He had stowed away massive quantities of wealth over the decades, but none of that could be accessed without risking his routine. Moving large sums of money would draw unnecessary attention. Currently his funding was scheduled to expire by the end of the month.

But Theodore couldn't trust anybody right now. Or risk taking on any new jobs. *What if they find out that I'm connected to Jade or Alan?* He had done his damnedest to clear his DNA at both residences, but there was always a risk. *What did I miss in my escape?*

Still, until Theodore knew more, he would return to his routine. After all, there are other ways for an assassin to get legal income. His old networks, for example, were willing to look the other way in return for profit—provided that the quality matched the price.

A few items stolen during a kill might afford the killer a few months of rent.

Glancing down at Alan Kim's golden watch, now resting on Theodore's own wrist, the assassin considered how many physical possessions a single billionaire had.

Would they even notice if a few of their items went missing? The more he stared at the watch, the more he started to ponder the question himself…

There must be countless gold-plated, diamond-encrusted luxury goods.

Perhaps Theodore could simply pick a pocket full of jewelry from each kill, letting each victim's family destroy each other in a frenzy over the last will. Meanwhile, Theodore would slip away with the crumbs. It would be more than enough for the man.

Yes. That last option pleased Theodore. A single piece of jewelry could provide for months of expenses—provided he picked a juicy target. But he couldn't risk taking the largest or most expensive item as its absence would be conspicuous. It needed to be a considered choice. He would also need someone who flaunted their wealth materially and loosely and who could "mislay" a few items without anyone noticing.

He would only need a single kill that could sustain him for the rest of the winter. He'd be satisfied then until he could figure out what to do about Tyler Santiago.

…

FOMO News continued to play softly in the darkness, the volume low enough that Theodore could tune the content out. But occasionally his ears would perk up upon hearing specific names or locations mentioned.

For example, how a few trust-fund billionaires—self-labeled "tech-bros"—had purchased land rights to construct massive homes inside nearby ski resorts over the summer and were now happily using them, taking up valuable space in the resorts.

Now, with New Year's Eve approaching, countless properties like these were filled across the region. Most of the mountains had lost their year-round snow, only a few could provide short seasons to handle basic snow activities. Everyone loved this season. And the resorts offered special discount packages to their billionaire guests to compete for their customer's interests.

Theodore's thoughts returned to himself for a moment… *perhaps, I can spoil myself with a little treat?*

Yes, he wanted a treat. Because a treat would align with his upcoming birthday: January 1, 1988. He'll be turning forty-two this year. *What better way to get some fresh air for my birthday?*

Around him lay an apartment in ruin—destroyed after Theodore had ransacked every cubbyhole, nook, and cranny. The man was determined to exhaust all of his options. And a few nights ago, while conducting his search, He found an old stash of collectable coins. Coins he had acquired over his lifetime. Most of the coins were gold, typically of the U.S. presidential series.

And one coin design bemused the man: Theodore Roosvelt, the United States president who had been feared among corporations, later called "the trust buster" for breaking up monopolies.

Theodore wondered if any investigator would believe a serial killer was using their literal first name in their murder signature? Perhaps, but unlikely. Instead they'd probably over-analyze every detail—presuming that the golden coins had other meanings, such as political parties or conveying a sense of "masculinity," or whatever.

But to Theodore, he simply found the idea of tipping a billionaire a golden dollar with his name on it to be funny as hell. Theodore even giggled to himself when he tried conceptualizing it.

Just gotta make sure to keep my DNA off the coins until delivery, though. Perhaps he could store the coins in plastic pouches filled with disinfectant? *Hmm… depends on how I feel. It might be too risky.*

Theodore also found uncirculated silver dollars from the years he taught courses locally, with the final one ending in 2024. He had no idea how many more coins were hidden in his home and began to wonder if bringing them along could provide some form of a cover? Say, for example, a traveling collector?

If I have enough random coins, he pondered, *I might pass it off during a search as a quirky habit. Carrying a small bag of personal coins?*

Whatever.

Theodore decided that the best course of action was to take the small bag of coins with him—along with the golden watch of Alan Kim. Theodore had debated selling off the watch, but *damn* was it a nice watch. And he didn't want to lose track of it.

Besides, leaving evidence alone in his apartment was risky, and selling this watch risked someone being familiar with its design.

I should just keep it on me but concealed under my cuffs. A personal memento.

A soft ding grabbed his attention—another email arriving in his inbox. Taking a moment to stretch, Theodore sighed and left his post by the window. He stumbled silently through the dark room, concentrating on the locations of his traps. Upon safely reaching his secure bedroom, he allowed himself to grab his NITO laptop and read his latest message.

It was as Theodore expected—another friend had gotten a job with Santiago. Most of them had by now. His old friends were ecstatic—they claimed they loved the pay and their new benefits were great. Some even remarked that their targets felt justified.

This news blew Theodore's mind at first—confirming the gossip that the peace had been broken between the billionaires. *Was that because of me?* He didn't know, but he found himself grinning like an idiot.

Looking back at the email, Theodore stared at a single sentence:

“You should join back up.”

His friends were insistent. They missed him, hopeful he would serve once again. And for a while, Theodore entertained this possibility. If Santiago didn’t suspect him, he was basically in the clear. It had been over a month since Alan Kim’s death and nothing had happened. Theodore appeared to have gotten away free.

But if the peace had been broken then no one would know who was safe to work for anymore. Sure, you’d get an amazing job and probably have little to do for a few months, but all it takes is that one day when things “hit the fan” and suddenly that money means nothing to you.

After all, you will always be outspent. Your boss will outfit you for a million dollars; meanwhile, your bosses’ competitors will be outfitting their teams for a billion. And all those rules, restrictions, and risks of death, just to die unknown for someone else?

Also, the majority of the Santiago contracts were split amongst their teams. Every person who joined was taking a part of share, and Theodore disliked how team dynamics acted in such situations. While everyone clearly won, people would happily take a moment to—shall we say—remove any extra shareholders from the equation. It incentivized a hostile work environment.

Great money—if you live to see it! All by design, of course.

Theodore returned his stare to Alan Kim’s watch; he could feel the motor ticking on his wrist, the mechanical actions whirling from within the machine and vibrating his skin. *How much is this watch worth? And how many watches do these billionaires have?*

His mind returned to the email asking him to sign back up.

No, Theodore finally decided. *A renegade living is more profitable.*

And with that, Theodore went back to planning his next assassination in the mountains.

For business looked good.

CHAPTER 21 — REFLECTION

HOW MANY WEEKS HAS SHE BEEN HERE? Lourina didn't know. Her desk calendar was too far away and she was uninterested in learning the answer. After all, today's date did not matter.

She wanted everything else to be visible and available instead. Around her office hung pictures of dead billionaires: their locations, dates of death, connections, and countless other variables that the private investigator believed were in play. Now *that* mattered.

And there were too many variables to account for.

Lourina's previously overflowing case board was now a minor segment in her manifesto. News articles, conspiracy website comments—all of them were strung up on her walls like a party garland. But critically, these walls were missing an important link. None of these deaths were in Washington State. *Or involved fires.*

Except for Mr. Gordon in downtown Seattle… oh, and for Michael Devine. Well, technically Mike had died in Las Vegas, Nevada due of "complications" during "strenuous exercise." But Mike had lived here, damnit! And even though he had threatened Lourina previously, she hadn't wanted the guy dead.

This world is fucking stupid.

The majority of these deaths were international. And as quickly as the news arrived, it disappeared. While social media would remain ablaze with comments, society otherwise moved on. Only a few conspiracy websites—later removed from search results—claimed that all these deaths were linked. But no one could prove how or even why.

Suicides, accidents, none that seemed like murder. Hell, one was a plane crash due to poor manufacturing! How is that planned? But enough blood was in the water to set the media in a frenzy. And they were right—because *dozens* of billionaires were dead. Was this connected? What

are the odds? Is this a network, or a single person? The FBI, of course, had publicly commented that they were unable to comment on potential investigations. Lourina scoffed at that.

If Lourina's money hadn't been secured by Mr. Kim's contracts, she might have been homeless by now. She refused to take on any new cases or entertain any new clients. Her mind just couldn't let this go—there was a puzzle in front of her and she felt close to the answer.

Fucking puzzles, she stewed privately.

She hated puzzles because they distracted her. She didn't want to think about puzzles right now—she wanted to relax! But her mind had other plans and she was along for the ride. In frustration she walked back to her desk and sat grumpily in her chair.

Lourina realized she'd lost her penchant for vocalizing privately in the car. Countless weeks of increasing paranoia and confusion would do that to you. It was also awkward when people stopped and stared at her talking madly to herself while waiting at traffic intersections.

She desperately hoped they believed she was on the phone or something and was not actually talking to herself.

And now she sat alone at her desk, patiently observing and taking in the details of the surrounding environment. The mystery, the epic scale, and the conflicting moralities she felt. How amazing to see these connections and to know what was happening!

And then she gave up.

Letting her head hit (somewhat) gently on a book in front of her, her body was being metaphorically crushed under the weight of her thoughts. Taking Herculean strength to gather her resolve, Lourina turned her head to face her coworkers—along with half of a page of the book that was now stuck to her cheek.

Huh, she idly mused to herself. *Page says… gold, but Brad is…*

She squinted at the brave, lone fish who dared to stare back at her. Focusing, Lourina discovered that Brad looked unusually red in comparison to the textbook's example. In fact, she realized that all of her tetras were redder than their reference photos.

Maybe it was the lighting of the office? Or maybe Lourina had been drunk when she remembered the details? Who knows.

Staring aimlessly in Brad's direction, Lourina mumbled an accusation towards the fish. "Why aren't you gold?" The textbook's example photo in front of her showed a golden fish.

Brad said nothing in his defense.

"G-o-o-o-l-l-l-d-d-d…" she slowly called out, taunting the fish.

But for Lourina, only an intrusive thought taunted her back. A single phrase, one that always got under her skin…

Silver Sanches, Lourina heard somewhere.

Here? Or in my head?

Startled, Lourina quickly sat up straight. She was now fully awake and alert—the book's page was almost ripped out of its binding due to the sudden force, thankfully it returned to its state of rest on her desk. *Don't you fucking start,* she warned herself.

She could never figure out where these thoughts came from, nor why they targeted her, but she maintained her vigilance in her pursuit to hold them back. She was in control. Not them. Not anyone else. *Me.*

This is all fucking stupid, she determined. *I'm not going to figure anything out here.* Lourina looked down at her desk and found her calendar hidden under some loose papers. *Ah, I still need to hang these up.* Lourina pushed the paperwork aside into another pile for later before gasping upon realizing that today was New Year's Eve, 2029. The last day of the decade.

Her younger brother had sent her a message previously, trying to reach out like her older brother had. Now both siblings were ganging up on her and she was starting to feel worn down. She loved her family, but she preferred her own path. She wanted her freedom.

Although… she entertained the distraction for a moment. *Maybe a short trip to Yakima would do me some good?*

She glanced back at the screen in the corner. *Minus the air quality, of course. But then again… la familia es todo.* Family is everything.

Feeling energized, Lourina reached for her phone and opened her messages. She would finally respond to her family's insistent nagging. She was giving in and was now ready to tell them about her free time this New Year, and… that she missed them.

Hasta mañana. Until tomorrow.

"Fuck this office," Lourina verbalized for her coworkers to overhear. Hitting "send", she committed to seeing her family tomorrow in Yakima. She would spend New Year's Eve here in Tacoma, though, of course—she already had a party scheduled with some former acquaintances tonight, after all (which she totally-didn't-almost-forget about until just now) and then she would head home.

Lourina allowed herself to open up and live once again. Plus, the drone firework displays by Santiago always looked fantastic across the Puget Sound. They could make anything with their formations.

Maybe I should visit my old alma mater on my way back? This idea conflicted her—revisiting her old campus would make her happy, but she would also feel lonelier than ever. Walking through her old sociology and criminology lecture halls, listening to theories along with their historical applications. But why should she visit?

She'd think about it.

Maybe on the way back.

Her eyes drifted on her desk, seeking out another visual distraction. And she quickly found one… the business card of Senior Special Agent Jasmine Zenith laying atop a pile to her right.

Lourina was still undecided how she felt about Zenith and had refused to contact her again. She also hadn't stored Zenith's number—although she wasn't sure why for that last part. Regardless, both agents had Lourina's information.

Whatever, they know how to reach me.

Standing up, Lourina began her lock-up routine. Lights, windows—all that good stuff. Passing by her fish, she stopped and stood before her audience. All four of her tetras were now staring at her. While she did not know why they were staring at her, she had decided to take advantage of the opportunity presented before her.

Staring at the first fish who caught her eye, Lourina used all her concentration.

"Charles," she said.

The fish said nothing while Lourina moved on to the next.

"Brad," she nodded to the only tetra with silvertips. *That was easy.*

"Alex," she said to the next attentive fish.

"And, of course, Danny." Who was also alphabetically in last place and, coincidentally the last she saw in the tank.

Lourina was sure of her effort this time and a surge of pride developed within her. She smiled for no one, only at the satisfaction with this moment of her life.

Turning her head towards the wall on the other side of the door frame, she focused her attention onto the large print-out photographs of each fish, along with their handwritten names under each,

which she had previously taped to the wall a few weeks earlier.

She consulted with her cheat sheet and verified whether she had been correct in her assumptions.

This time? Success.

And it made Lourina feel like she was on top of the world.

Now it was time to party like it was 2029!

CHAPTER 22 — FIXATION

YOU WOULD THINK this kid would have learned by now.

Almost twenty-one and he had his whole life ahead of him. He had the money, the connections, and the opportunities to create a life that Theodore could never imagine.

But now Hunter will never be able to learn again.

Hunter had been quite the character. Before today he had been living alone in his expansive two-story cabin, temperamental by nature, frequently raging online and doing whatever weird things Theodore could spot through the binoculars. Everyone seemed to ignore Hunter… even his parents' security detail barely cared enough to visit him.

They came once, days ago, and did a half-assed job of checking the grounds. Despite all the recent billionaire deaths, it appears this single trust-fund inheritor was left out of the pack. This suited Theodore just fine, as did some of Hunter's expensive trinkets that Theodore tucked away during the cleanup process.

Hunter allegedly had a habit of annoying people and somehow getting away with it. His family, in return, had an extensive history of lawsuit settlements. Whether it was from questionable behavior at college or his taboo trips abroad, Hunter was merely tolerated in upper society. It was unlikely anyone would notice if a few of his goods went missing, including some "pocket" change—at least to the rich—so long as everything else inside looked fine.

It was, admittedly, quite strange to Theodore that Hunter did not seem to be partying this New Year's Eve, even when you factored in his isolation and mental instability. There were some fireworks and alcohol scattered throughout the cabin, suggesting to Theodore that Hunter would stay indoors this evening, but Theodore couldn't risk his target potentially getting randomly invited to a nearby cabin.

Days of watching and waiting, feeling the weight of the gold wristwatch holding him down. Theodore couldn't figure out what to do with that damned watch of Alan Kim's. He should have left it at home in one of his stashes, but his blood ran cold every time he parted with the evidence. "What ifs" would start to creep in and overwhelm his paranoid mind.

No, he couldn't part with the watch. Not yet.

He decided the safest place to keep it for now, while alone and hiking, was on his body. It was under his jacket and concealed, of course, but he needed to feel its physical weight at all times. A subtle soothing reminder. He didn't trust the watch to not fall out of his pockets or somehow get misplaced; thus it remained on his wrist.

And after days of watching Hunter, Theodore decided two things:

1. Once he got back to his place he would deal with the watch permanently. *Maybe I could melt it down and turn it into a trophy?*

And 2. Now was the time to kill Hunter.

With the cover of snow surrounding him, the assassin in white stalked his way across the route he memorized from afar. He easily avoided the cameras, which were poorly placed from a security perspective, and snuck in close before the sun went down.

Without warning, the satellite internet went out. The frustrated gamer on the second floor cursed to himself. And an unstable reaper opened the back door on the first floor. All according to plan.

Hours had been spent on cleanup. Theodore took his time, though he still wanted to get out of the cabin before it got too dark. Who knows if one of the neighbors might get drunk enough to invite their lonely neighbor over. Or whether that security detail would return to do a checkup and find—

Thump.

Theodore—on the first floor with the body, finalizing his DNA cleanup—froze in place. It was as if someone had blasted the main doors open and let a winter storm in. He didn't move. He just listened. Something above him, on the second floor, had moved instead.

The assassin quietly stopped doing what he was doing and stalked to the nearest lights, which were next to the main lobby and the staircase. The first floor went partially dark. Some movement was heard above, sounding like someone else was creeping around.

Security? Theodore considered. *The second floor? Why? How? I swept the place! How many more are there? Who did I miss?*

Grabbing the heaviest object nearby that he could reasonably wield—a heavy snow globe—the killer advanced on the looming threat. Not ideal, but he figured he could hold it with just one hand and throw it or use both hands to quickly and violently smash it down on his target.

His dark under outfit, which contrasted his white snow suit that lay in the dark corner, allowed him to blend into the void of the light. He pressed his body next to the stairs, just around the corner, ready and waiting for whatever happens next. He will rush the first guard he sees and take it from there, keeping his presence as quiet as possible until he needed to break out his trusty gun again.

Footsteps shuffled unsurely above his head, slowly winding their way towards the stairs. No one called out in challenge, no one questioned why the lights were off, there was just the faintest sound of movement. The uncertainty bothered the assassin.

Did I trip a silent alarm? Theodore couldn't help but wonder as he waited for this next target. *Will they call for backup before I can get them?* He needed to survive long enough to get to Santiago, damn it. How dare they—

The stairs creaked. Theodore tensed. His fingers twitched. And he changed his stance.

A dark figure stopped at the bottom of the stairs and began to turn around the corner. But

Theodore was already on top of them. A scream was heard and a body fell to the floor.

A single blow had been enough. His target was smaller than he'd expected—weaker too. It had been trivial. Theodore merely needed to slam down onto their head with the heavy snow globe and they were gone. Some of their blood spilled onto Theodore's hands.

Blood was also surging inside Theodore's veins after the brutal assault was over, his bloodlust becoming insatiable. He waited in the dark for more movement, because now he would throw the globe and rush the next guard to create something more personal.

But moments passed and no further movement was heard. His pulsing blood the only constant as his mind calculated his next steps. Uncomfortable silence remained in the cabin and Theodore's mind began to wander. *Where are they?*

Silently and cautiously, Theodore put the bloodied globe down on the ground. He carefully retrieved his pistol—this time carried on his hip for quick access, as concealability was no longer a priority—and moved back to the lights. He flipped his gun's safety switch first before then flipping the light switch with his bloodied hands.

On flicking the switch, the light was blinding. Blinking momentarily as his eyes adjusted, he regained his composure and swept the room for targets, his body moving towards the staircase to remain close to the wall for cover, his eyes glancing down while scanning.

He stopped breathing. His body felt cold, as if plunging under the ice into a frozen lake, his mind temporarily going blank with shock.

This wasn't a security guard! This is... no, this was... a teenager. Her facial expression remained mid-scream, her body limp mere steps away from Hunter's. None of what we saw made any sense.

Theodore couldn't accept this realization. His mind went into overdrive trying to understand what had just happened.

Where did she come from? Why did she sneak in? Why didn't she call out? Oh god, what have I done?

Dead eyes stared at him accusingly.

He began to triage his emotions and focus on what he could do. Theodore needed to act quickly after this unexpected development.

How long before people notice she is gone?

The killer, now as pale as Hunter's body, lowered his bloodied pistol and began to shake uncontrollably. The adrenaline was wearing off. There were no more targets for him to distract himself. Just one question repeated in his mind as he stared into those dead eyes…

Who are you?

CHAPTER 23 — SPLASH

WHERE ARE YOU, YOU LITTLE SHIT?

Lourina stared intently at the tray of food before her. She had ordered a large batch of fries to go with her burger; however, she had discovered a single onion ring hidden deep within them.

While sitting in her chair, she attempted to extricate the offending ring, only to unleash calamity, as her fries spilled all over her tray and on top of her burger: like a dam bursting from the bundle of fries.

At least everything was still on her plate, nothing having fallen off or been wasted. It was just a mess. And Lourina really didn't mind—the food here was exceptional. She treasured this mining-themed restaurant for many reasons. For one, it was the perfect pit-stop before home.

After so many months away from home, someone was probably going to critique her figure—maybe justifiably—so she wanted to eat alone before heading over to deal with that. She missed her family's cooking, of course, but she wanted to avoid any confrontations this year (such as about her weight gain over previous the weeks).

Another reason why Lourina enjoyed this place so much was that she could stress eat. There was so much great food here to eat, and after her long morning drive from Tacoma to Yakima, she needed something filling. And to give her stomach some food after all the alcohol she'd consumed the night before at the Pearl Bar.

But during her drive, the news only talked about the latest deaths following the New Year's Eve festivities. A twenty-year old trust-fund mega-millionaire and a seventeen-year-old girl who had been visiting him, had died overnight in a tragic fire. Intoxication and fireworks were suspected to have been involved, based on the victim's social media reports just hours before their deaths, though the investigation was still ongoing.

Something wasn't right about that report. And driving alone across the pass—near where the crime had occurred—made Lourina think hard about the connections. But her mission was to go home for now, so she settled on fishing for her onion ring instead, now battling the salty sea of fries to extract her catch.

Lourina found herself enjoying the absurdity of the moment, resting her mind in anticipation of the onslaught of questions and comments she expected at home. Still, the stray onion ring had amused her. But now, chewing on her prize, another fish caught her attention.

Despite the blackened haze that lingered outside the restaurant, a lone figure walked through the filtered doors, scanned the place, and entered the service line. Lourina stopped and stared at the latest customer.

There is no fucking way. Lourina stood up out of shock.

...

She wasn't supposed to be there. Why was she there?

Theodore had monitored the cabin, planned everything down to the smallest detail. But that girl wasn't part of it. *She wasn't supposed to be there! Why did she sneak over? Why did she have to investigate?*

Theodore could feel a black hole developing within his heart. He was barely able to sleep last night. He couldn't even focus on his routine. Rather than hiding out for a few days camping, he had decided to head back home early and build up his location history there.

Talk to people. Build more covers like Yani.

He needed to move quickly to compensate.

Discuss the hike and the camping grounds. Use receipts as cover. What am I missing? He padded his coat jacket, his receipt from the gas station in Ellensburg the latest in his collection.

The fire had only been necessary because he hadn't planned for the girl. W*hat will the autopsy find? I had to quickly take her out. She would have told someone!*

He was next in line and waiting to be served, only casually absorbing the restaurant's layout. But while standing still, as he drifted between what had happened last night and the present, something else caught Theodore's attention. There was a presence behind him. The sound of fast movement, with heavy footsteps showing a purpose.

Someone rushing towards him. But no one shouted or called. Theodore tensed up, his right hand slyly reaching for his compact 9mm under his golden windbreaker jacket. Would the person approaching from behind see him reach for it? He'd take it slow, turning his body to face the oncoming danger. *And why here? In public? With all of these wit—*

"Instructor Hudson?" a familiar voice called out.

Theodore R. Hudson, former corporate assassin and former law enforcement officer, froze. Calculating what to do, he decided the safest approach would be to deescalate the situation. Letting his hands go limp and returning his body to his natural state, Theodore loudly replied to the distant voice… "Silver Sanches?"

…

The man at the back of the line turned around to face her. "Is that you?" he asked with an aura of familiarity and playfulness.

Lourina laughed with joy at her discovery. She had been right! It was Instructor Hudson, one of the three instructors who she'd lost track of over time. She missed him. Well, minus the teasing, of course. "Silver Sanches" still annoyed her—the nickname given to her back at the academy after she always came in second place.

Instructor Hudson left the line and approached her. It had been quite a few years since they'd

last talked and the man's hair was graying slightly. He was also sporting a mustache now. It didn't really fit him, but hey, let the man enjoy his style. Otherwise, he looked fit and healthy. The jacket he sported looked good on him, too.

She decided to give him a big hug—it had been too long. They were just old friends, but she wouldn't let this fish go. She could feel his concealed vest through the hug but thought little of it.

"My favorite student," the man replied, his face displaying an excitement that grew contagiously. "Did you ever get that office you were always talking about?" His expression indicated teasing with a hint of curiosity.

Lourina laughed while stepping back. "Yes," she admitted. "I took your advice, sir."

Instructor Hudson waved his hand in the air. "No more, 'sir,' Sanches. It's just Theodore now." The man shrugged, looking sad.

"Lourina," she said in return while offering her hand to shake. He shook it gently. She smiled at him, enjoying the moment.

He seemed to perk up.

"May I join you, Lourina?" Theodore asked, his right hand pointing towards her table. Lourina was momentarily caught off guard, unaware that Theodore had known which table was hers.

"Oh, weren't you just in line?" Lourina asked while walking back.

"No, I had already ordered." Theodore clarified. "I was waiting for them to finish." He glanced down at her plate. "And, uh…" his voice trailed off, his eyes now looking at Lourina with confusion and some accusation. It reminded her of her cadet days and caused her to feel the need to defend herself.

"I've made a slight mess—yes," she confirmed. "But there was a reason." They both sat down across from each other at the table.

“Oh?” he said, leaning towards her in his seat. “This I gotta hear.”

“There was an onion ring.” Lourina had to suppress her urge to laugh. She maintained a straight face for her joke.

…

An onion ring? Theodore thought about this for a microsecond. *Who knows? Act natural. I’m exposed. Where’s the door again?*

“Sounds justified,” he replied neutrally while trying to remain calm. He wasn’t sure what she was getting at. He feigned a smile in return, hoping to lighten the mood. She excitedly gave one back.

Theodore was enjoying this moment, all things considered. Cadet Lourina Sanches had been his favorite student during his last class. He remembered the final stretch of his instructing days before he’d decided to permanently switch professions. No more sidelining or experimenting between morality. He knew where the money lay and where his duties fell. He jumped ship years ago.

“You know,” Lourina began, “I am glad I ran into you.”

“Why’s that?”

“I could use your advice.”

“Oh?” Theodore looked down at her plate again. “With what?”

“I’m on a hunt,” Lourina teased.

Theodore chuckled to himself. First, the fries were all over her plate—and now her taunts of a hunt. He really missed talking with her. She was one hell of a cadet, one with a bright future. She could’ve easily escaped the game… and it appears she had. Lourina always had some smartass or political thing to say for the group, even though she denied it. He didn’t mind, in fact, he found it

amusing.

"I'm serious," Lourina began to fish her burger out from under her sea of fries. "A serial killer. Out here in the Pacific Northwest."

A serial killer? Theodore hadn't heard of anything—unless she was talking about the recent corporate assassinations. And no one on the news or online indicated there was a serial killer before.

No one knows about me, right? He shyly looked around the place.

Shrugging, Theodore wasn't sure how to respond. "I'm unfamiliar with any new cases," he admitted while leaning back into his chair, hoping to appear bored.

Lourina shrugged. "Because the FBI isn't looking for them." She glanced up. "But I am." Her brown eyes momentarily met his blue.

Theodore stared at Lourina while she took a bite of her burger. "You're serious?" *Is this part of her new PI gig?* He was at least enjoying the intellectual thrill. "Tell me more."

Lourina nodded, giving only a single word in response. "Piranha," she said. Taking a moment to chew her burger, she began to clarify. "He—or they—struck again yesterday."

Theodore slowly sat back in his chair, feeling his pistol press against his lower back. He casually glanced around the restaurant.

"Yesterday?" he asked while his eyes looked for doors.

Lourina nodded, now looking around the restaurant to make sure they were alone. She didn't want anyone to overhear. Taking a small sip from her drink, she forged on. "Yup. That cabin fire last night? That was Piranha."

…

Lourina decided to give Theodore the quickest rundown she could manage. She didn't want to

waste his time—especially since he kept fidgeting, perhaps his lower back was hurting him. While Lourina had no issues with her chair, she realized she had no idea what sort of condition Theodore would have been in after decades of service.

Poor guy, she commented somberly to herself. *I hope he feels better.*

Other than those slight twists, and a few tugs at his jacket, the man didn't move a muscle. He was otherwise transfixed on her words and listening intently. For the first time in months, Lourina experienced validation—someone was finally listening to her. Finally giving her the attention that she needed to solve this case.

She told him everything except for working for Alan Kim directly. She wasn't sure if he would judge her for working with Santiago, plus that NDA still covered such divulsion. Instead, she discussed the evidence from an impartial perspective and the larger details and trends as needed.

And at the end, Theodore contemplated to himself for a moment, Lourina had asked him to give her advice. She was hopeful her old instructor would drop some profound knowledge onto her, something to help her navigate such an unknown situation. Theodore's eyes returned to lock with hers, his response escaping his lips as cool as a winter breeze.

"Let it go, Sanches."

"What?" she burst out, slightly louder than expected, chilled by his response. She was deflated, hoping to hear a piece of brilliance from her past instructor. But "let it go?" That wasn't what Lourina expected to hear. Not from instructor Hudson. *No…*

Theodore gently shook his head. "No," he clarified. "While I do see some of the connections, yes," he soothed her, "it sounds like something above your league. Not to dismiss you, Lourina, but you said the FBI declined?"

Lourina sat back in her chair, emulating her instructor. She was now slightly pouting, placing

her body into autopilot so her mind could deliberate. “Well, yes,” she started. “But their field agents claimed there were some politics involved. Santiago. You know how it goes. They didn’t want to get involved.”

“And you want to get in between that?” Theodore scolded her bluntly. “Keep it Simple, Sanches.” The man winked at her. “Don’t go jumping into the rapids, okay?”

Lourina sighed, trying to wrap her brain around the conversation. She truly thought Instructor Hudson—Theodore—would have helped her. But he hadn’t.

What a shitty new decade today is turning out to be, Lourina observed.

After a few moments of silence, Theodore decided to break the ice and mend the relationship. “Oh!” he exclaimed. It made Lourina flinch. “I have a present for you.”

The man reached into his inner coat pocket, searching for something. Retrieving his offering, Lourina stared down at the black pouch held in his hands. She was curious. *Damn,* she observed, *he always had class. I mean,* she glanced at his wrist, *just look at that watch!* She couldn’t see it well from here, but it was gold and impressive. Theodore had always had style.

And now, while he rummaged through the small pouch of coins, Lourina became fully invested. She had no idea where this was going, but she was excited. After another moment, the man extracted a single coin—a silver dollar.

“Ah-hah!” he said with pride. “Here it is.”

“Here’s what?”

“Your graduating class dollar.”

“My what?” Lourina was confused. *I got paid a dollar during graduation? I mean, that sounds about right upon reflection, but…?*

Theodore shook his head. “I collect coins. And every class year I was an instructor I would find

uncirculated mint editions." He looked at her with amusement. "Class of 2024. So full of hope."

His eyes were now staring off into the distance, seemingly distracted. In his hand twirled a silver dollar, with Lady Liberty and the year 2024, engraved on one side. It flashed in the restaurant's lights.

Before Lourina could respond, her former instructor leaned across the table and handed her the coin. He smiled, his hands encompassing her grasp and feeling warm. She enjoyed the touch and didn't want it to stop. A second later and his hands retreated while a single coin remained in hers.

She stared down at her palm, transfixed at her discovery.

…

Lourina shook her head. "You sentimental old bastard," she laughed.

What! Theodore hadn't expected the accusation. "Old?" He took that personally. "Okay, you know what? When I was your age—" he started, but then Lourina cut him off.

"Here we go again," she teased.

"Oh, no. You don't get to change the—"

"Anyway," Lourina changed the subject. *Perfect, let her take the lead, have her think she controls the conversation.* "What brings you to Yakima?"

Theodore froze, recalculating his thoughts. "Camping," he told the truth, his mind painfully aware of some potential holes in his story—he needed to escape this restaurant. *Now.*

"Oh, near Ellensburg?" she inquired further. "Better hills over there."

"No," he lied. "I haven't been that way recently." He quickly remembered the routes. "I came from the South—I live in Richland. Why do you ask?" He deflected semi-truthfully.

"Oh, I don't know. I was considering visiting my old university. See the old campus. Back before the academy."

“How was it?” Theodore inquired, hopeful this was another tangent. He started to play with his cuffs, wanting to remind himself of *all* the options before him. Before he hurt anyone else.

Because right now the only thing the man saw in front of him was the face of the dead teenage girl speaking to him. Her face was burned off, her eyes charred black, her image somehow projecting on top of his reality. *Not again, not now!*

Go away, damn you!

The dead girl looked up at the ceiling, trying to put together her words. “Different,” she finally explained, slowly. Her mouth moved strangely. “It felt different driving right past it. I didn’t go inside.”

The soulless eyes returned to stare at his—the abyss gazing back.

You’re not real, damnit! I’m looking at Cadet Sanches. I mean, Lourina!

Theodore gulped but nodded to hide his physical reaction. While the view in front of him was disturbing, he maintained his control. He mentally focused on what Lourina was saying. He even understood, times change, even if locations remain the same. Just like Portland to him. And right now, Theodore was simultaneously free yet morally condemned.

But the FBI isn’t going after me? He liked that part at least.

“Here,” Theodore interjected. “I’ll give you *my* contact info. We’ll catch up some more another time, okay? I’m sorry, I have to get going, but it was great seeing you again, Silver.” He winked at her, hoping that his tease would be taken lightheartedly—whilst distracting. He grabbed a napkin and a pen from his jacket to write down his information.

He needed to get away, to grab his filtered mask for the wildfire smoke and to escape from the apparition of a corpse sitting across from him.

It worked. Lourina always stewed when he used her old nickname. Just like back at the

academy—it worked.

…

Unsure of what else she to say, Lourina acquiesced. She slowly stood up, rounded the table to Theodore and gave him another long hug. She sensed Theodore jolt at first contact before eventually returning the squeeze, making her unexpectedly happy for the briefest moment—an embrace between old friends.

Her mind was still reeling about Piranha—and having to see her family again in a few minutes—but she was still grateful for the brief chat with Instructor Hudson. *Or Theodore,* she corrected herself. *That might take a while for me to get used to.*

You know what? Maybe he is right. Lourina entertained the thought. *Maybe I should let go of Piranha? Move on. Today is the first day of a new decade, after all. A new me.*

"See you around, Silver." Theodore winked at her while zipping his jacket. Lourina watched as the man turned around and left the restaurant, heading towards the parking lot.

Lourina softly laughed to herself about the absurdity of the situation. While she had let her guard down and given up on chasing her suspect, she had instead reconnected with an old friend—and she was now free to pursue a new path in life.

After all this time, Lourina mused, *can I finally move on?*

She savored the remainder of her drink sipping on her straw as Theodore drove away. Around her remained an otherwise normal restaurant with people moving around and orders being taken.

Okay, Piranha, she resigned herself. *You win. I'll stop fishing. For now.*

She finished her meal in quiet contemplation and readied herself for her next mission. Dealing with the family.

But already Lourina found herself reminiscing about her "good times" with Piranha—at least a

serial killer wouldn't hassle her about her recent weight gain. *It's just a little stress eating! Fuck off.*

Reaching down for her purse, Lourina noticed a small piece of white paper next to her foot. *Oh hell,* she thought. *What did I drop now?* She reached down and picked up the note, recognizing that it was a receipt. *Is this from my order?*

Lourina concentrated on the words. A heartbeat later, she realized that this wasn't a food receipt—it was a fuel receipt. Amused by her discovery, Lourina nosily read further out of curiosity, until a single word caught her attention. One that took her less than a second to realize what she had seen:

ELLENSBURG

JAN 01, 2030

09:31 AM

Ellensburg. The name of the city from where her university resided, printed on the receipt before her. But Lourina hadn't visited Ellensburg today—she'd only driven past. She had already filled up her fuel tank back in Tacoma before driving over the Snoqualmie Pass.

Obviously this receipt wasn't hers; however, the time on it confused her— a vehicle filling up at 9:31 AM could only have traveled to Yakima within the past few minutes. And as far as Lourina was aware, no one else had been sitting here when she had arrived and later ordered her food.

It couldn't have been Theodore's—she didn't see him drop anything, did she? And besides, Ellensburg is *north* of Yakima. Richland is *south*, well, more accurately southeast.

But the receipt is less than an hour old and the distance traveled about forty-five minutes. And

the only people who have sat here recently have been her and Theodore. Lourina concentrated again, this time on her memory of Theodore.

Maybe he'd picked it up outside? Meant to bring it in for the trash can?

Wait, didn't he say he had just ordered his food?

But why would he leave?

She remembered his hands reaching for the pouch that contained her new silver dollar, and suddenly… she gasped. She remembered seeing the watch!

The watch.

Alan Kim's watch.

The one that had shocked her while flying on the helicopter over Jade Devine's grave.

Lourina physically recoiled as if bitten. Everything was starting to make sense and the information flooded her veins with cold horror. How the killer was able to cover his tracks, where the killer operated, and why only she had been able to notice the killer's habits.

It was him. Her favorite former instructor. One of the three who had disappeared from her life and resigned from their law enforcement careers just as she was entering hers all those years ago.

Looking down at the receipt before her, Lourina's eyes wandered over to a flashing light that was glancing off the silver coin Theodore had just gifted her. A woman stood on the coin proudly, representing the figure of Liberty. She held a torch in one hand and a flag in the other. Lourina couldn't stand to look at it.

This whole time she had been searching for her Piranha, and yet Piranha knew her—had trained her, guided her—and was now aware of her attempt to hunt for him.

Alone. Without firm evidence, without backup from the FBI, or any special connections with Santiago.

A serial killer. I just invited a serial killer into my life.

And with that, Lourina's sense of reality had turned to darkness.

Everything about her life to this point was shattered. Her trust of the people across her entire reality had disappeared. Her universe was now dark, matching the black wildfire smoke that surrounded the lands outside.

Worst of all? She knew the truth and yet had no proof.

And her killer fish had just swam away.

EPILOGUE

“WHAT ARE THE PROJECTIONS?”

The question caused multiple figures assembled around the table to fidget nervously in their chairs while sweat accumulated under their black designer suits. At the back of the room, one man sat in relative isolation of the others, inattentive to the room, his evergreen eyes fixated on the tablet screen in front of him.

Until this moment, the meeting had gone by with little commentary—beyond reporting on the basic facts and figures, of course. The numbers danced around on the projections before the group. Meanwhile the presenter took a moment to compose himself before responding to his distracted boss.

“Provided there is no interference or any unexpected delays,” he began, “253%.”

Gasps were heard throughout the room. One man tipped a glass of water over on the table, its ice cubes floating freely down the sequoia finishing. No one had expected that much. No one.

Yet the man sitting idly by himself at the back of the room continued to focus on his own personal screen for a moment. He then stopped, his eyes flickering up to meet the presenter’s gaze.

“Are you certain?” he asked.

“Yes,” the presenter replied quickly. After another heartbeat, the presenter hedged his bets and added a second comment to clarify. “Plus or minus the usual range of deviation.”

This answer seemed to satisfy the man in the back of the room. He nodded approvingly. “Well done,” he said. “Keep me advised if anything changes.”

Knowing that his work had “threaded the needle” and satisfied his boss, the presenter exhaled. He knew the question would eventually come up—it always did—but this time the question took longer to arrive than usual.

The presenter was not sure why his boss continued to stare at his tablet—a quarterly increase by 253% was absolutely insane. Yet following the sudden deaths of countless billionaires, only one person remained to reap the rewards of others.

Perhaps to a trillionaire, such an increase is merely "chump change?" the presenter mused privately. The presenter didn't know, but he did know that his job depended on him continuing with the rest of the projections. *Just move on with the slides,* he decided. Taking a moment to clear his throat, he replied to his boss in acknowledgement.

"Yes, Mr. Santiago."

Tyler fucking Santiago, sitting apart from the rest of the room, had his attention momentarily satisfied. But his mind remained distracted, for his latest report troubled him. He stared at the screen, absorbing the message as he considered his response.

REPORT: 01 JAN 30

SANCHES, LOURINA NMN *SPOTTED IN YAKIMA, WA.*

> ***CONTACTS (ALERT)***

> ***NEW:*** *MALE, WHITE, AGE 40 - 50.*

>> *BLUE EYES. DARK BROWN HAIR.*

>> *MUSTACHE. IMAGES ATTACHED.*

>> *FACIAL ID ONGOING.*

SANCHES *AND* ***CONTACT*** *KNEW EACH OTHER.*

> *BOTH APPEARED SURPRISED WHEN MEETING.*

> *ACCIDENT? POSSIBLE COVER? UNKNOWN.*

EXPAND SURVEILLANCE TO SANCHES UNKNOWN*?*

> ***<YES/NO>.***

Tyler reread the report, wondering how far he should tug this thread. Normally he'd allow his teams to conduct business at their own discretion, and his interest in Sanches had waned after the deaths of his most formidable adversaries.

As far as the report had determined, she lived alone, a life unsatisfied, without a lover or much hope. She rarely left her apartment or office outside of random bar encounters with strangers or old friends, most of whom rarely contacted her. She may have had a year of her rent paid off but she was otherwise adrift in life.

Unfortunately for Lourina Sanches, though, a single photograph would change her life. Attached to the file was a photo of Theodore R. Hudson, handing Lourina a silver dollar while wearing a golden watch.

A golden watch that Tyler Santiago had personally gifted to his former Chief Operating Officer for his handling of their first startup together all those years ago.

Alan… he reminisced.

He could even see a portion of the custom engraving Tyler had made for Alan Kim when he zoomed into the picture.

A golden watch…

One that told Tyler everything he needed to know.

A single reply was sent back to the observation team.

> ***YES.***

TETRA: For They Know

Book two of Tetralogy

M.R. Void

PROLOGUE

ALL I NEED TO DO IS KILL HER, Theodore realized with a flash, *and then all my problems will go away — poof! No one would ever know.*

The Federal Bureau of Investigations wasn't going after him—she just admitted it. How perfect for Theodore, she trusted him and had told him all of her observations. She had put everything together and discovered the hidden serial killer in the Pacific Northwest: Theodore R. Hudson, former law enforcement officer, corporate assassin, now turned societal renegade.

And she told me the FBI wasn't looking!

How fortunate for him that his former protegee, Lourina Sanches, a cadet he helped train nearly a decade ago when he was still a law enforcement instructor, came to him for "help." She had finally left the force and became a private investigator. *Good for her.*

Shame she put all the pieces together, though. Sorry, it's nothing personal.

In a world of ten billion people, she could easily disappear. Just a quick snip of her car brakes, for example, or a single —

Theodore violently shook his head to stop himself from going down that mental pathway. His blue eyes scanned the road ahead of him as his mind was aware of the weight of his concealed pistol pressing against his back.

Knock it off, he warned himself mentally.

His foot pressed down on the accelerator in annoyance. The speedometer on his car rose in response while the black and hazy smoke from a local wildfire outside blocked all vision beyond the immediate road ahead. Few drivers would be found on the roads today: it was the morning of New Years Day, after all, and most people were still resting at home. But one private investigator just had to be in the wrong place at the wrong time and had run into Theodore. *Damn you, Lourina.*

However, the killer was conditioned to find the silver lining in everything; thus, he enjoyed knowing the larger game at play. Especially after hearing that the FBI was not actively looking for him. *Good, that means they know this is above their pay grade.*

His ghostly face took in the dead lands surrounding him: his mustache bristling as his mouth alternated between smiling and frowning. His mind was reeling with everything she had said.

What did she call me, again? he pondered. *Piranha?*

An unusual name, but Theodore understood why people liked to create monikers for things. He did the same, admittedly. Still, he couldn't quite grasp why he was nicknamed "Piranha."

But the FBI wasn't Theodore's biggest concern. Another name had been dropped by Lourina during their earlier chat in that restaurant. A name that ignited a firestorm within Theodore's chest.

Santiago.

Tyler Santiago, the world's first trillionaire, was Theodore's ticket to the afterlife. The assassin had finally decided after a long career to "earn his right to die"—and that meant taking down the king. Lourina had no idea what that name meant to Theodore.

Santiago had the resources to find and handle Theodore quietly. He controlled the largest assassin group in the United States, potentially the world, and made entire governments bow before him.

But Theodore had struck first: he'd killed Santiago's chief operating officer nearly two months ago as a test-run before going after the king. The executive had been surprisingly easier to get to than Theodore had envisaged, which pleased the assassin, but the resulting global instability had shocked him. While laying low and preparing to hibernate over the winter and devise his plans for Santiago, dozens of billionaires across the globe suddenly and mysteriously died.

None of which were done by Theodore's hands.

It seemed a billionaire civil war was brewing. Hundreds of them were beginning to develop class consciousness in the face of their trillionaire king. Santiago must have mistaken Theodore's attack as being part of a larger movement, and the trillionaire struck back.

But it wasn't another billionaire: it was just one mad man.

The thickening smoke outside began to seep into his car, his lungs painfully aware of the particle's encroachment into his breathing space. He began to cough and felt lightheaded.

And he was already bone tired. He hadn't slept well. Not after last night. Everything had gone perfectly until that girl arrived and—

He shook his head again to distance the thought. He didn't want to think about her. He needed to concentrate on the road—especially after he almost drove off it while ruminating.

Who are you?

These were the only words he could muster when her dead eyes appeared in his mind. He wasn't entirely sure if his question was intended for her…or for himself.

The surrounding Yakima lands, smothered by smoke from the raging wildfire on Mt. Tahoma, created a deathly appearance before the man. The lands were being suffocated, just like Theodore was. Climate change had begun to dramatically affect the Pacific Northwest over the years, and it appeared that the 2030s would begin with more fire. What a lousy forty-second birthday for Theodore.

He merged back on to Interstate 82, the near-empty highway part ahead of him. He needed to continue his path back to his apartment in Richland, Washington so that he could rest and think. He'd had to break his hiking cover a few days earlier than he'd preferred after what had happened with the girl. His mind wouldn't rest; he was seeing her projected onto his reality occasionally.

Those dead eyes…

He knew he could solve any problem with enough time, even this. He just needed to think: to contemplate, assess, and evaluate what had happened and where he should go from here. He'd stolen enough valuable trinkets from that cabin that he could easily pawn off to his special network and continue saving money for the winter.

Then I can deal with Lourina Sanches. And Tyler Santiago, too.

A smile crept up his mustached lip as he reminded himself of his current objectives. He was still accelerating south down the barren highway to his apartment when something caught his eye: a glint of light suddenly appearing in his rearview mirror...

Flashing lights from a police car, specifically.

One that was rapidly getting closer.

Find out more in TETRA: For They Know!

Read more or follow along at mrvoid.com

DEDICATION

TETRA: From the Many is dedicated to my wonderful family (Mom, Dad, grandparents, and more), my countless friends, and everyone else who supported me whilst writing it.

Additionally, TETRA is dedicated to my readers (August, Belle, Hanna [aka “Zara”], mom & dad, Jaxithda, Tier, plus anon), friends who’ve allowed me to use their likenesses for draft character inspiration (Amory, Aneesha, Asin, Jasper, Kelly, Jade, Yanira), and to my countless friends who have either influenced me, the character designs, or the plot points. There are too many to list.

Finally, TETRA is also dedicated to Lotus.

Thank you for pressuring me to write this novel.

I wish you were here to read it.

I miss you, dear friend.

TETRA is a work of fiction and satirical in nature.

Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

As with everything in life, moderation is necessary. Please do not replicate anything found within TETRA, nor use the work for any sort of ideological or political purposes.

Illustration for the Tetralogy series provided by the exceptionally talented **Aidee Sea** of After Death Comics, for whom I am forever thankful. (Visit **aideesea.com** and Instagram **@afterdeathcomics**)

Thank you for your time,

V

TETRA: FROM THE MANY

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M.R. Void is a former ***[REDACTED]*** for the ***[REDACTED]***.

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He specialized in ***[REDACTED]***.

M.R. Void lives in the Pacific Northwest, where he can hike and experience all the wonderful lakes and woods that adorn the region. He enjoys traveling and photographing the world, such as Victoria, British Columbia and San Juan, Puerto Rico. Void also enjoys listening to soft jazz while observing rain hitting the window.

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